

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



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For a workers' government

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THEY SAY THERE'S

NO MONEY

WE SAY

TAX

THE

RICH!

**A workers'
plan for
the
crisis:
see
centre
pages**

What is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists' relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.



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We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses.

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Libya: peace postponed?

By Martyn Hudson

Protestors threw hand grenades at the entrance to the National Transitional Council (NTC) headquarters in Benghazi on Saturday 21 January and torched the Head of the NTC's car.

Under pressure from the same protests the deputy head of the NTC, Abdel Hafiz Ghoga, has resigned.

Widespread hostility to the NTC leadership erupted into violence and an occupation of NTC buildings, with security forces unable to resist protestors entering the buildings. There is serious disaffection at the new regime's inability to free itself entirely from its pro-Qaddafi past. Abdel Hafiz Ghoga was implicated as someone who just didn't jump ship quickly enough to the side of the rebels.

The protestors are saying the revolution has been taken from them, that new government contracts have been awarded to NTC acolytes, their Qatari backers, and an inherited crew of business people implicated in the old regime.

The protest is galvanised by high unemployment among young people exacerbated by the return to Libya of well-educated exiles who want some stake in the administration of the country, basic educational

Benghazi protests

rights and employment prospects.

As the militias are disbanded this is becoming an ever more significant problem.

IMPETUS

There has been some increased impetus from the burgeoning women's groups — two ministries are managed by women — but the fait accompli of the constitutional Islamic state and its sharia law has already been secured, creating an uncertain future for secularists and women.

The NTC have been deliberately obstructive to the International Criminal Court in the case of Saif al-Qaddafi perhaps as a sop to the disbanding militias who want to see him tried in Libya.

There is a whipping up of the pro-vengeance populist rhetoric by many in the NTC and in the country as information about the

level of rapes committed by the pro-Qaddafi forces becomes clear. In a traditional society like Libya such trauma has led to a significant numbers of suicides.

The town of Tawergha has now been forcibly erased from the political map, its pro-Qaddafi population dispersed and hunted by the Misrata militias.

Many were looking forward to the Africa Cup of nations hosted by "dictatorial" Guinea and Gabon — a new Libyan football strip and triumphant victory could have resulted in a display of national unity. But the Libyan team lost to Equatorial Guinea whose players were awarded a bonus of a million dollars each by their dictatorship, further ratcheting up the disaffection of millions of Libyans.

Islamists and secular parties are now emerging in the new period. There has been a reassertion of the rights of religious and eth-

nic minorities including amongst the Berbers of the Tunisian border and the Nafusa mountains who were critical to the success of the uprising throughout 2011. Many have proclaimed their own state of Amazigh and the Amazigh flags can be seen right across Western Libya. It may signify a descent into communalism or a genuine form of self-determination but so far it has largely been ignored by the NTC struggling with its own problems in Benghazi.

FRUSTRATIONS

Frustrations about the constitution, about jobs, about who has the right to remake a new Libya were predictable.

What political currents may benefit from this are not however. While a constitutional Islamic state is not a clerical fascist dictatorship, the Freikorps of the radical Islamists, however small at this point, are organising and born out of some tendencies in the disbanding rebel militias.

Only the embryonic development of the organised working class can point some way towards a future for Libya.

That must be a future free of the corrupt grandees of the NTC and the spectre of a resurgent clerical-fascist movement.

Fight Tory populism

By Sam Ruby

On 23 January the House of Lords voted to exempt child benefit payments from a government proposed £26,000 annual cap on household benefits.

The government squashed that amendment when the Welfare Bill, which includes the cap, comes back to the House of Commons.

It is important to note that everyone, on all points of the mainstream political spectrum accepts and justifies the "need" for a benefit cap, including, disgracefully, the Labour Party. John Bird, founder of the *Big Issue* has backed the government — even though this "reform" will make many homeless!

The benefit cap, along with rising rents, and other benefit cuts will mean 80% of privately rented homes will be unaffordable by 2016. Large areas UK cities will be no-go areas for working-class people. The low paid and jobless will end up in ghettos of poor, cheaper housing. Up to one million people could be made homeless.

The Tories have won the arguments by using pop-

ulist arguments.

They make a big deal about the cap being in line with "average wages" (how generous!). But "average wages" are not enough to cover the needs of families especially where there are dependents. The Tories also say "people in work have to make choices about where they can afford to live, so why shouldn't those on benefits"?

But these arguments make no sense.

If people in work are struggling to pay their rent and bills — and millions are — the answer is not to make life more miserable for others. For everyone move in search of "affordable" private rented homes (as seven million people rely on credit to pay their housing costs, "affordable" is a relative term)?

Why make more people miserable? So those in work can feel marginally better off than the 2.7 million (and rising) who are not?

The answers — and these should form the basis of a labour movement campaign — are things like rent controls, building council homes, no cuts in benefit.

For the right to criticise religion!

By Ruben Lomas

A meeting of the Atheism, Secularism and Humanism Society at Queen's Mary's University in east London on 18 January, discussing "Shari'a Law and human rights", was cancelled after a man burst into the room, filmed all the attendees and proclaimed he would "hunt down" anyone who insulted the Islamic prophet Mohammed.

The incident follows a similar furore at University College London, where the Students Union moved to take disciplinary action against its own Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society after it produced posters with cartoon depictions of Jesus and Mohammed sharing a drink.

An atmosphere cannot be allowed to develop where any set of beliefs, including religious ones, are protected from criticism or even mockery. The claim that secularist or atheist criticism of Islam is "insensitive" at a time when

Muslims face discrimination in society conflates people of Muslim background with their religious beliefs. We do not have to defend religion, or abandon our criticisms of it, in order to defend religious people from racism.

Anyone who believes in basic freedom of speech, never mind secularism, should defend QM and UCL ASH Societies' right to hold meetings and produce publicity without fear of intimidation, harassment or censorship.

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Let's turn all Greece into Chalivourgia!

By Theodora Polenta

The massive participation of private and public sector workers in the 17 January strike called by the Greek union federation PANATIKI showed the working class is willing to resist the most barbaric attacks on their working and living conditions in 50 years.

Greek workers face attacks that the President of the Euro group, Jean-Claude Juncker, has predicted "will exceed every imagination": further redundancies, unpaid work, destruction of collective bargaining agreements and pro-worker legislation, reductions in wages and pensions, cuts to health and education.

As unemployment fast approaches one million [population of Greece = 11 million], workers are going on temporary contracts of five months and monthly incomes of around 625 euros — an equivalent to 223 euros per month over the course of a year!

A large number of local private sector unions participated in the 17 January strike. Due to the efforts of the radical left within the rank and file movement (SYRIZA, ANTARSYA), workers from the public sector joined the strike.

A four-hour stoppage of the teachers' unions (OLME, DOE) enabled them to participate in the strike. The two-day strike of media workers and the participation of students further empowered the strike. A lot of rank and file unions from the private sector participated in PAME's block, demonstrating in Athens (PAME is the trade union front of the Greek Communist Party KKE). Unfortunately, KKE, in the name of "revolutionary purity", demonstrated separately.

KKE's stance was yet again a barrier against the

willingness of the working class to form a united front to fight the attacks.

The tone of the strike was set by workers and workplaces that have been on continuous strike and in occupation in the last months. The workers of Chalivourgia (three months in occupation), of Loukisa (almost two months in occupation), of 3E, of ALTER, of *Eleytherotypia* are showing that only uncompromising, militant, continuous occupations and strikes can defeat the government.

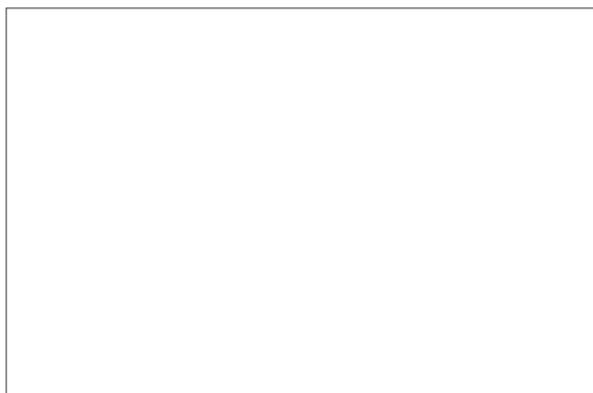
On 17 January delegates from different workplaces, including the Chalivourgia workers, met the Minister of Labour. They demanded Chalivourgia bosses reinstate sacked workers. But the government said they cannot intervene in an open economy. At the end of the meeting the rank-and-file leader of Chalivourgia, Sifonios, spoke to other strikers: "The working class does not have any alternative. We have to escalate our struggle till they withdraw their anti-working class measures. It is imperative for every workplace to take industrial action. Let's turn all Greece into Chalivourgia!"

CURRENT ACTION

Loukisa (aluminium factory): The workers of Loukisa have been in occupation since 5 December. Their employers owe them 10 months' back wages.

About a year ago the employers stopped paying wages. Yet the company carried on with big projects inside and outside Athens. Since then they have tried to intimidate the workers by (unsuccessfully) trying to send in sub-contracted workers as scabs or by threatening to sack all the workers.

A couple of weeks ago they offered the workers 50,000 euros, a fraction of



Chalivourgia steelworkers: 12th week of strike

the unpaid wages. The workers decided to carry on their occupation.

A similar situation is being experienced by all workers in the aluminium industry. The rank and file in the industry are organising and coordinating their struggle. Two weeks ago aluminium industry workers demonstrated and handed a statement of defiance to the Ministry of Labour.

3E (printing company): Printing workers at 3E have been in occupation over unpaid wages. 3E's work is important; the company has the monopoly to publish school books. When the workers decided to organise and demand their unpaid wages the employer sacked several workers.

Instead of being intimidated they organised a six-hour stoppage. The employer then shut down the factory, cut off the electricity supply, lied saying that the factory was under occupation, and blamed the workers for the company's financial difficulties.

Media workers: The media industry is experiencing a double crisis: one due to the economic crisis and another arising from the development of the internet and changes in the way information is gathered and shared.

Employers have escalated attacks on media workers including redun-

dancies, reduction and non-payment of wages, destruction of collective bargaining agreements, and use of a clause in bankruptcy law which allows them to dodge legal obligations towards employees.

The employers take for granted that ESHEA (the media workers' trade union) should accept a 20% reduction in wages and no guarantees against redundancies.

Media workers participated massively in a two-day strike (17/18 January). In individual sectors militant strikes are taking place.

In the vanguard are the continuous strikes of the journalists and media workers at ALTER (TV station) and ERT (Greek BBC) and on *Eleytherotypia* (liberal newspaper).

The ALTER workers have not been paid for over 18 months. Their employer has paid off his debt to the state but refuses to pay wages. The ALTER workers have been occupying the station since last autumn.

Within the context of escalating workers' struggles, control of the media is very important. That is why the confrontation between the government employers and the media workers is expected to be very tough.

Blueprints for a media under workers' control, in contrast to the mainstream media, are being prepared at ALTER, where the work-

ers are in charge of their channel and news programmes. They frequently interview Chalivourgia workers.

The media workers of ERT are public sector workers, affected by the changes to government salary schemes (up to 40% reductions in wages). The ERT workers are in the third month of rolling strikes.

Eleytherotypia workers have been unpaid since July. The employer has experienced cash flow problems, and applied for a loan to the banks to pay wages. After the intervention of the government and other rival publishers, the banks refused to provide *Eleytherotypia* with a loan.

The reasons are purely political: *Eleytherotypia* has carried anti-establishment political opinions.

Chalivourgia (steel factory): The 400 workers of "Elliniki Chalivourgia" are now in their 12th week of an heroic strike against poverty, redundancies and casualisation of work. The metal workers rejected the employer's proposal to reduce working hours to five hours a day, and impose a 40% reduction in wages.

Their message is clear: "We are not returning to a dangerous job that places our lives at risk for the pittance of 500 euros per month and without our 34 sacked work colleagues being reinstated."

The struggle of the metal workers has taken on a huge symbolism for the entire working class struggle.

This was the first private company to make use of all the recent anti-working class legislation. It is the first private company to introduce draconian conditions in an attempt to replace jobs with stable and secure monthly wages, and welfare and insurance benefits, with casualised labour. These bosses want to blaze a trail for others.

On 18 January workers in Volos and Velesino (facto-

ries also owned by Chalivourgia boss, Manassis) went on solidarity strike in defence of the Chalivourgia workers.

CAPITALIST UNITY

The capitalist bosses are united against the working class.

Two options are "offered" to the working class: get sacked or accept reduced wages and dismantling of rights and conditions such as the right to job security and full-time, permanent employment. The plan is simply to make workers pay for the bosses' crisis.

When the crisis is over the workers will be left with poverty level wages, precarious working conditions and no safety net, unorganised and defeated as a class.

The coalition government is providing full back-up to the capitalist employers and bankers; handing over to them cash that comes from the Greek taxpayers; writing off their debts; and refusing to intervene against the employers who are terrorising their workers.

The governing parties PASOK, Nea Dimokratia and LAOS, despite their small-print disagreements, are united in backing all these measures.

But the class struggle is cutting through the whole of Greek society. The winter of discontent is not over, it is just starting.

It is the role and duty of the revolutionary left to place itself in the vanguard of struggles against the destitution of the working class, with a revolutionary anti-capitalist manifesto. It must build a united front and consistently revolutionary culture.

The left must connect up these struggles, with the strategic aim of the revolutionary overthrow of the rotten capitalist system.

Costa Concordia: cruise industry workers must organise

By Hugh Edwards

The tragic Costa Concordia sinking off the coast of Tuscany, with the loss of 15 lives and 20 people still missing, has turned the spotlight on the cruise industry, a world dedicated to pandering to the snobbery and greed of the rich and wannabe-rich.

In this world every need of the passenger is met by an ever-smiling, grateful and humble crew.

The "Jack-the-Lad" captain in charge of the 110

thousand ton vehicle the Costa Concordia was desperate to prove he could bring it to within 150 metres of the little island of Giglio in order to "salute" a former sea captain.

This dangerous practice had been condemned for years by local fishermen but was widespread in the company and tolerated by the Italian coastguard. Instead he collided with a rock as big as the Tower of Pisa.

Conniving with the Italian-American owners of the ship, he then lyingly described the problem as

an electrical failure whose complications forced him to ground the ship in order to save lives.

Then he and three of his most senior colleagues commandeered a lifeboat, denied entry to it of four elderly passengers (two of whom are among the missing), and left the remaining 300 or so people still on board to their fate.

The squalid details point up the gulf between the lies and hypocrisy of the public face of an industry that boasts of the technological innovation offered to indulge its consumers, and

the primitive and racist working conditions of the 18,000 who staff the 25 cruise ships of the Costa Cruises company.

Most of the crew are from Asian and South American countries, 80% of them are under 40 years of age. They work 12-15 hours a day, seven days a-week for an average of \$500-550 a month.

Workers have to pay 500 euros to complete a three-day course on safety procedures!

Their living quarters are minuscule — two to a room five metres square — and

no contact with the passengers is permitted.

Only the white, European, Italian and English-speaking, better paid workers have jobs that serve the ships' clientele, from whom they rely on tips to earn something like a half decent living.

No workers have longterm security — all are on four-eight month contracts, none of which are automatically renewable.

These conditions create a regime of fear, insecurity, isolation and vulnerability, all the better to lower the costs.

And the trade union movement? Despite the fact that the working hours cited above are well-known and a gross violation of Italian law, the representative of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Cgil) for the company denies them, quoting company assurances that the law is observed and that wages exceed international regulations.

The struggle to resist the shame of what is happening in this industry calls also for democratisation of the trade union movement.

Workers' representation, football, and the Italian unions

Letters



Fight for real workers' representation

Britain's biggest union, Unite, "should only fund Labour when it supports [their] policies", says Jerry Hicks, left challenger in the union's general secretary election in 2010.

Hicks's article, which has been doing the rounds in the left "blogosphere", is full of contempt for Unite leader Len McCluskey, accusing him of hypocrisy in attacking a Labour leader whose election he (along with Unison and the GMB) effectively engineered. Hicks exhorts McCluskey to "Stop wringing your hands, stop moaning and stop funding them!"

A perfectly reasonable line of argument, surely? Why should unions, particularly one with as much potential clout as Unite, give money to a party who — in government or opposition — has helped reinforce the cuts consensus in British politics?

But the problem with Hicks's approach, and indeed with the entire way in which the relationship between trade unions and the Labour Party is understood by almost everyone in the British labour movement (including both the union bureaucracies and the far-left) is that it conceives of the relationship in essentially financial, machine-politics terms.

It is a conception of political engagement consisting essentially in trade unions "buying" political favours from an external political force. If a particular politician or political party doesn't deliver on the paid-for favours, stop the payments and give the money to someone you expect to do a better job.

This is how unions do politics in America, where there is no labour party (small 'l' and 'p' deliberate). The funding invariably goes to the Democrats; the unions give them money, and turn out activists to campaign for them, in return for political scraps-from-the-table (or, more frequently, the promise of scraps). There are no channels through which workers, through their unions, can exert direct control or accountability over the Democrats. The relationship is mediated through union bureaucrats (themselves unaccountable) playing machine politics with Democratic senators, congressmen and women, and other officials.

This is undoubtedly how the hardcore New Labourites would like the relationship between their party and the unions to function in this country too. Severing the structural link between the Labour Party and the unions has been a long-held dream of the Blairites, and one that they have only held back from trying decisively to make a reality through a lack of confidence.

HYPOCRISY

Certainly, McCluskey's hypocrisy should be called out, along with the hypocrisy of Unison's Dave Prentis and the GMB's Paul Kenny, who have conducted similar media exercises in macho-posturing (both have talked of "reviewing" their unions' relationship to Labour).

Their real hypocrisy lies not in their role in getting Miliband elected, but in their roles as part of trade union leaderships that have, at practically every turn, acquiesced to the New Labour machine when they could have stopped it in its tracks. In 2007, when the Labour leaders proposed a raft of anti-democratic reforms to party structure at its Bournemouth conference, union leaders talked a good fight but ended up voting the reforms through.

McCluskey, Prentis and Kenny have absolutely no intention of disaffiliating their unions from Labour. Besides, a summary disaffiliation by unions on these terms, necessarily motivated by a business-unionist complaint that affiliation to the Labour Party was no longer value for money, would be a financial blow for New Labour but a political victory. It would represent the completion of the Blairite project to turn the Labour Party into the US Democrats.

The confusion on this question is widespread; Bob Crow and Mark Serwotka (two of the most left-wing bureaucrats) have toyed with the idea of union funding for Plaid Cymru, SNP and even Lib Dem candidates. Most on the far left

would balk at unions supporting what are clearly straightforwardly pro-capitalist parties, but if your only conception of political engagement is based on buying political favours from the least-bad electoral party, then why not throw some money at Plaid?

After the abject experience of Labour in power, the little-better experience of them in recent opposition and the generation of anti-democratic reform in the party, it's understandable that even people on the trade union left have internalised and accepted the basis on which union bureaucrats and New Labourites want the Labour-union link to function. But if socialists are to be useful in the fight for genuine working-class political representation, our perspective has to be based on more than knee-jerk cynicism.

Channels for union self-assertion inside the Labour Party are radically different now than they were even 15 years ago, but they still exist. The unions could still exert massive political pressure. They could get radical policy onto the floor of Labour Party conference. They could demand that Labour councils refuse to pass on Tory cuts. Some of what they could do might have a targeted financial element; within a framework of continued affiliation, they might refuse to fund individual MPs and councillors who voted for cuts. The reason the unions have not done these things is not that they are impossible, but that the union leaders lack the political will to do them and rank-and-file union members lack the democratic structures within unions themselves to force them to act.

That list is far from exhaustive, and there are plenty of ways the unions could assert themselves outside the Labour Party too (including backing independent candidates if and when it makes sense, as the RMT, CWU and FBU all did while still affiliated). But the aim is to shift the political terrain, not simply to buy into a "value-for-money" approach to political representation.

The Labour Party is not "reclaimable" in the crude sense suggested by those on the left for whom loyalty to the Labour Party is a religion. In all likelihood, any consistent political self-assertion by unions on anything approaching a radical political basis would precipitate a splintering of the existing Labour Party, with most MPs and the entire New Labour machine decamping (perhaps to merge with the Lib Dems), or pushing through a formal severing of the union link. That potential should not be shied away from; in fact, if it happened as the result of a consistent fight, it would be positively to be welcomed.

Of course, we're nowhere near that happening now. It would require seismic shifts within the unions themselves and a reinvigoration of independent rank-and-file organisation (something else the left has consistently failed to meaningfully organise for). A perspective of the unions using the existing link to disrupt, subvert and, if necessary, cause a split (rather than hive off one by one) is "blue sky thinking". But it's "blue sky thinking" that starts from where we are now and proceeds forwards. The "blue sky thinking" of Hicks — that the unions will disaffiliate, one by one, and give their money to someone else instead — is both less plausible and less desirable.

It would be a step back for working-class political independence, a political gift to New Labour and a reinforcement of the machine politics that both New Labour leaders and union bureaucrats are desperate not to see disrupted.

Darren Bedford, London

Ignorance in the Suarez scandal

A few weeks have now passed since Liverpool player Luis Suarez was found guilty of using a racially objectionable word towards Manchester United's Patrice Evra. But in the storm that followed the incident in the game last October, huge levels of ignorance around racism were shown.

The stance that LFC took to defend a player that admitted to using a word that we would describe as racist was extremely disappointing. To say that, because he has always worked with black players, he can't be racist, and that the word is acceptable in the Uruguayan's country, is completely irresponsible.

The days after the LFC statement gave us a snapshot of society and people who are naïve and ignorant blindly following the lead of the football club, playing down racism. A number of people said to Stan Collymore on Twitter that black people "just have a chip on their shoulder" and it is

no different than being called fat or bald. Then we saw an alleged incident of racial abuse from a Liverpool fan to an Oldham Athletic player during a match at Anfield in January. LFC released another statement, this time condemning the fan and reiterating Liverpool's previous hard work to kick racism out of football!

That was like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted; if that statement had come straight after the Luis Suarez charge then we may have avoided the alleged abuse in the Oldham game and also the thousands of rival fans that are undermining the seriousness of the situation by making racist jokes at Liverpool's expense.

Racism is a way of making millions of people that have a lot of things in common turn the things they don't share into negatives, thus keeping them divided. The majority of people in the world have struggles everyday and they are told to blame at each other for the reason we have to struggle.

When we stop doing this we will realise it's the people telling us to blame our neighbours, who are the real problem.

The only time they struggle is when they have too much capital and nothing left to buy; they are the lowest class in society but call themselves the upper class.

R, Liverpool

Too sweeping on Italian union leaders

I agree with a lot of Hugh Edwards's article ("Italy's corruption crisis needs workers' solutions", *Solidarity* 230, 18 January 2012), especially his scepticism about the Monti government's crackdown on tax evasion and corruption (which is a structural problem of Italian capitalism and will not disappear just because Berlusconi has been replaced by somebody who does not engage in tax fraud, false accounting and the bribery of public officials).

However, I think he is being far too sweeping in his criticisms of the trade union leadership. Or, to be more precise, of the CGIL, since the only reason the former Berlusconi collaborators in the CISL and UIL have shown any sign of resistance to Monti is the example set by the CGIL.

I am only too aware of the extent to which Susanna Camusso, the General Secretary of the CGIL, has in the past failed to give all out support to the engineering workers' union FIOM in its heroic struggle against FIAT's attempt to exclude fighting trade unionism from its plants (and return to the dreadful climate of repression that prevailed from 1948 until 1968), but we should give credit where credit is due.

We should recognise her current resistance to the attempt to abolish Article 18 of the 1970 Workers' Statute, the clause giving workers in workplaces employing more than 15 people protection against employers' attempts to sack them "without just cause" (in other words to sack them for trade union militancy or political views) — protection which currently enforces reinstatement and not just financial compensation.

Given that not only Italian establishment figures like Mario Monti, Labour minister Elsa Fornero and Confindustria [the Italian employers' federation] President Emma Marcegaglia but also the ECB, the EU Commission, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the IMF all want Article 18 scrapped, Camusso's resistance should not be dismissed in such a cavalier fashion.

Whilst I would acknowledge that Camusso is only an old-fashioned social democrat and not a communist, her defence of her members' interests compares extremely favourably with the abject capitulation of Barber and Prentis in the UK.

I would also like to stress that whatever the manifold deficiencies of the Party of Communist Refoundation, that party does stand up for workers' rights and is not a "stinking corpse" as the AWL, so correctly, described the British Labour Party before your recent retreat into entry work.

Insofar as Edwards has a perspective for the future he seemed to counterpose a rather abstract "rank and fileism" to the trade unions and the "radical left".

But the grave weaknesses of horizontalist soft autonomism were amply displayed on 15 October 2011 when the sidelining of FIOM and the PRC by the organisers of that day's anti-capitalist demonstration meant that the Black Bloc literally ran riot in Rome, largely nullifying the effect of a mass demonstration against austerity.

Toby Abse, south London

The outlook for 2012

The public sector pensions battle is not dead. The lecturers' union UCU has called a further strike for 1 March, and activists will be pressing hard for, at least, the civil service union PCS and the teachers' union NUT to join in on that day.

But the campaign has been severely wounded by the decision of the big unions, notably Unison and GMB, to call off action and turn to haggling over detail of the Government's supposed "final offer" of 19 December, which was in fact only a slight sideways rearrangement of its previous, rejected, formula of 2 November: work longer, pay more, get less. As well as pushing to continue action for pensions, activists need to review our position. The setback on pensions is a serious one. But it does not abolish the prospects for mobilisation.

Working-class history tells us that important battles do not necessarily start from the most predictable issues or flash-points. Sometimes what looks in advance like the "main" issue, and the one most likely to rally a broad working-class mobilisation, passes with relatively little action; and an issue which seems secondary or off-centre creates a bigger stir.

There are plenty of issues coming up: service cuts, pay freezes, radical marketisation of the Health Service, benefit cuts, "new standards" in schools... And there is plenty of discontent to supply the raw material for mobilisation.

The capitalist crash of 2008 is visibly leading into a lengthy depression. The question now is whether there will be a new economic crash, triggered by a eurozone default, or whether there will "only" be prolonged, grinding stagnation or regression.

The Government's cuts are visibly not healing the crisis. We are paying the price of those cuts, but not getting the benefit which the Government claimed for them, a reduction in the Budget deficit and a (supposedly consequent) private-sector revival.

Also visibly, these are not cuts where everyone suffers. The wealthy, after a brief setback in 2009, are doing very well, while the majority suffer.

Confidence about alternatives is still low; but dissatisfaction with things as they are is sufficient to push all the main party leaders into blather about "responsible", "moral", or "John-Lewis-type" (co-operative) capitalism, implicitly admitting that the capitalism which really exists, the capitalism which before 2008 they hailed as a new golden age, is irresponsible, immoral, and cut-throat.

Despite all the weaknesses of the Occupy movement, a worldwide poll in January 2012 found 53% of people sympathising with its protests, 35% undecided, and only 12% hostile.

The big-business daily, the *Financial Times*, has been sufficiently impressed to start a big new series on "capitalism in crisis". Its main writer on economics declares that "people are closer to despair. Something seems to be wrong with the system... A thoroughgoing overhaul [is] urgent".

The task Workers' Liberty and *Solidarity* set ourselves now



is not to guess the next flashpoint, or to read our tactics backwards from a prediction of what the next big struggle will be, but:

- To explain our basic view that capitalism is not at all "the end of history", but a passing phase of human society; that it inescapably generates conflicts which organise and rouse the working class; and that the working class, mobilised and educated, can and must replace capitalism by a different form of society, a democratic cooperative commonwealth.

- To popularise and agitate for a "workers' plan" of demands against the cuts and against privatisation which fit together with each other and with our basic socialist view.

- To rally to every working-class struggle, and argue for the labour movement to support, popularise, and build on each struggle.

A lesson from the past is relevant here. In 1921 the new, revolutionary, pre-Stalinist Communist Parties reassessed tactics because it was becoming clear that, outside Russia, capitalism had survived the great upheavals at the end of World War One.

They developed the idea of "transitional demands", as an alternative both to revolution-or-nothing agitation and to a timid routine of seeking piecemeal improvements. They would propose a linked network of demands. Mobilisation around each demand, with united-front tactics, would open the way to further and more radical demands, and the whole network would culminate in agitation for a workers' government.

Explaining this approach, the Communist Parties contrasted it with an older socialist theory, associated with the "Lassalleian" strand in the 19th century German workers' movement: "concentrating all the energies of the proletariat on a single demand, using it as a lever of revolutionary action that then develops into the struggle for power".

"This theory is false. In the capitalist countries the working class suffers too much; the gnawing hardships and the blows that rain down thick and fast on the workers cannot be fought by fixing all attention on a single demand chosen in a doctrinaire fashion.

"On the contrary, revolutionary action should be organised around all the demands raised by the masses, and these separate actions will gradually merge into a powerful movement for social revolution".

way Scottish socialists should vote on independence. And if Scotland does vote for independence, socialists should press for a democratic decision — best by a democratic elected assembly, elected after full debate — on the political form of the independent Scotland.

Generally socialists favour larger political units, the reduction to a minimum of the barriers between peoples which state frontiers create, the levelling-up of conditions over wider areas, the unification of the working class over wider areas to fight for common conditions. The exception comes when the creation of a larger political unit involves the domination of a stronger nation over a weaker one, and so injustice, friction, and, usually, cramping economic disadvantage for the weaker nation.

The Scots are a distinct nation; but not *very* distinct, not as distinct as the Norwegians were and are from the Swedes. They share a language with England. There is a large degree of economic integration and a common labour movement. Of the people now living in Britain who were born in Scotland, 15% live in England or Wales; of the people living in Scotland, 15% were born outside, most in England.

Historically, the Scots were partners in the British empire, not an oppressed nation within it. That makes a strong argument for retaining the broader unit, i.e. voting against independence. The status quo is faulty, a sort of lopsided quasi-federalism.

A democratic federal republic in Britain — abolishing the monarchy; democratising politics; clearly defining Scotland, England and Wales as the federal units — would be cleaner and clearer. Within that, the aim of socialists would be to "level up" between the federal units and move to closer unity as fast as is compatible with the wishes of the populations.

Help the AWL to raise £20,000

The AWL is growing. We now publish *Solidarity* weekly, setting up new branches and expanding all areas of our activity. If we are going to continue this, we also need to expand our sources of funds. That's why we're launching an appeal to raise £20,000 by the end of August. A donation from you, or a regular standing order, will help.

We need money to:

1. Continue publishing *Solidarity* as a weekly;
2. Establish a fund for publishing high quality books and pamphlets;
3. Improve our website;
4. Organise events such as our New Unionism dayschool next month, and our Ideas for Freedom summer school;
5. Organise study courses;
6. Build on our work as one of the main forces fighting for rank-and-file democracy and control in the labour movement;
7. Build on our work in developing a broad, democratic student movement against fees and cuts;
8. Pay the rent on and finance the staffing of our office to make all of the above and more possible.

We have no big money backers. We rely on contributions from workers and students like you! So please consider:

- Taking out a monthly standing order to the AWL. There is a form at www.workersliberty.org/resources and on this page. (Even a few pounds a month really does help.)

- Making a donation. You can send it to us at the address below (cheques payable to "AWL") or do it online at www.workersliberty.org/donate.

- Organising a fundraising event.
- Taking copies of *Solidarity* to sell at your workplace, university/college or campaign group.

- Getting in touch to discuss joining the AWL.

For more information on any of the above, contact us: tel. 07796 690 874 / awl@workersliberty.org / AWL, 20E Tower Workshops, 58 Riley Road, SE1 3DG.

Total raised so far: £6,030.



We raised a fantastic £1,440 this week in donations and increased and new standing orders.

Thanks to Mike, M Shabat, Kristian, Jill, Paul, Mick, Stuart, Bruce and Tom U! Comrades are beginning to make fundraising plans; please send in reports.

Socialists and Scottish independence

The people of Scotland have the right to decide whether they want to be part of a common political system with the people of England and Wales, or to separate.

For the majority of the readers of this paper, in England, that is the chief issue raised by the current moves for a referendum on Scottish independence.

The people of Scotland should have their say. The more clear-cut and simple the referendum question, the more democratic the decision will be.

For readers in Scotland, a second question arises: how should they vote in the referendum?

Lenin wrote much about socialist attitudes to national conflicts. One of his chief examples of principled socialist policy on a national conflict was the separation of Norway from Sweden, through a referendum in August 1905.

The Swedish monarchy and aristocracy threatened war if Norway went for independence. The Swedish socialists responded militantly: "Hands off Norway!" Lenin argued, "the dissolution of the ties imposed upon Norway by the monarchs of Europe and the Swedish aristocracy strengthened the ties between the Norwegian and Swedish workers".

Yet, he said, the Norwegian socialists could without any breach of principle leave it "an open question as to what extent the autonomy of Norway [under Swedish rule] gave sufficient scope to wage the class struggle freely, or to what extent the eternal friction and conflicts with the Swedish aristocracy hindered freedom of economic life".

Norway's independence referendum was followed in November 1905 by another referendum, on whether the independent Norway should be a monarchy or a republic. (The Norwegian socialists lost: a majority voted for a monarchy).

The same follows for Scotland: vigorous support for Scottish self-determination leaves open the question of which

Standing order authority

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Sort code:

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20047674 at the Unity Trust Bank, 9 Brindley Place, Birmingham B1 2HB (08-60-01)

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They say there's no money

By Martin Thomas

Since the start of the Thatcher government, in 1979, the rich have been getting spectacularly richer in Britain (as in many other countries), and the gap between rich and poor has been increasing.

The gap has continued to increase in the economic downturn since 2008. All the main political parties say that cuts in social spending and a squeeze on wages and benefits are necessary — even if they argue about the extent and the speed — because, as Ed Miliband puts it, “we are not going to have lots of money to spend”. In fact there is lots of money to spend. The question is, who has it, and what will they spend it on?

Between 2009 and 2011, the richest one thousand people in Britain — just one thousand of them — gained £137 billion, a 53% rise in their stash to £396 billion (Sunday Times Rich List).

Directors of the top 100 companies had a 49% rise in average earnings in 2010-1, to almost £2.7 million each, while average gross earnings for full-time workers fell 5.9% in real terms between April 2007 and November 2011.

That was not a blip. Payments to top-100 bosses have risen since 2000 from 47 times average earnings to 102 times.

According to a recent report by the OECD, income inequality among working-age people has risen faster in Britain since the mid-1970s than in any other well-off country.

Annual average income of the top 10% in 2008 was about 12 times higher than the bottom 10%'s average. The gap had increased from eight to one in 1985. The increase in the gap is driven mostly by the top one per cent whizzing higher and

higher: their share of total income more than doubled between 1970 and 2005.

Research published in the *Guardian* on 23 January indicates that the better-off will continue to pull ahead from now until 2020. On present trends, not only people reliant on benefits and social services will fall behind. A solid chunk of 15 million people in households where adults have jobs and do not rely heavily on benefits will see their real wages fall or stagnate. The average annual disposable income in that category is set to be 8% lower in 2020 than in 2007.

Top pay has risen specially fast among those same financiers whose frantic money-juggling brought us the crash of 2008. Bonuses in high finance and in other industries totalled £22 billion in 2011.

There is lots of money around. There is lots of real wealth represented by that money. The problem is who has it, and how they use it.

DEMOCRATIC

Taxing the rich, and bringing the whole of high finance under public ownership and democratic control, to gear it to social goals, would abolish poverty and end gross economic inequality.

It would also permit the expansion of public services so that everyone able to work could have a decent, useful job, rather than some people being jobless and others being overworked, with the pressure of mass unemployment helping to keep them overworked, as at present.

Sometimes the rich say that inequality is regrettable, but not really hurtful. If the incomes and the wealth of the top few were redistributed among the population, they say, the

average person would get only a little extra. But (they claim) the availability of great riches for a few spurs people to compete and excel, and thus increases the average well-being more than redistribution could.

It's not true. There is no evidence that unequal societies are more productive and innovative than more equal ones. Probably they are less so.

Statistically, more equal societies have better rates of health, education, and public safety than more unequal societies *on the same average level of income and wealth*: they thus waste human productive resources less.

BILLIONS

The Coalition government's planned cuts for 2011-2015 total £18 billion from benefits, and £16 billion from education and other local services.

They are big cuts. But the amounts going to the wealthy — £22 billion in bonuses for a single year, £137 billion gain in wealth by the top one thousand over a single year — are much bigger.

In 2008 the Government supplied £1100 billion in cash, credit, and guarantees to banks on the brink of collapse. £1100 billion! There was “lots of money” for the Government to deploy then.

Most of the £1100 billion was notional in the sense that it was not cash, but guarantees, loan facilities that might not be used, etc. But amidst it was a real transfer of cash from the Government to the ailing banks, some dozens of billions at least.

Another argument used to counter the case for taxing the rich and expropriating the banks and financial institutions is

Resist the “John Lewis economy”

By Sacha Ismail

Nick Clegg's advocacy of a “John Lewis economy” in which more workers own shares in “their” company is nonsense, an attempt to put a progressive spin on the massive assault on working-class living standards and rights which his government is overseeing.

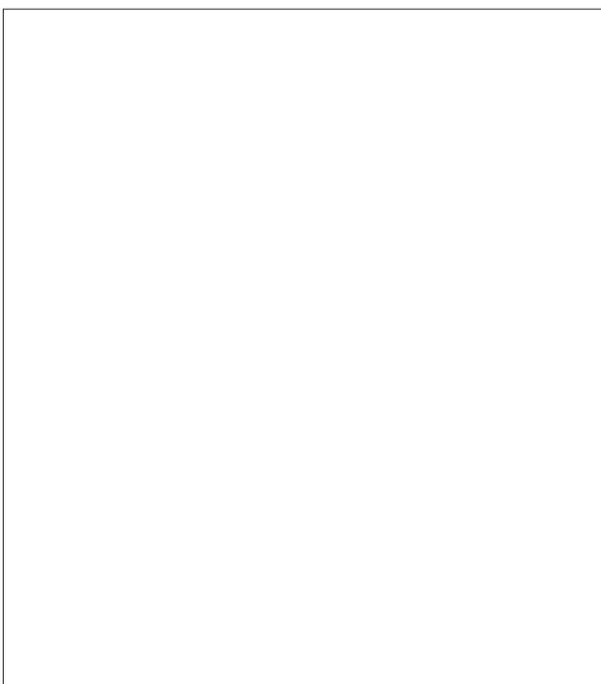
Claiming that politicians are “too often cowed by corporate power” (yes) and denouncing “crony capitalism” (yes), Clegg has called for a “well-rewarded workforce” through more “employee share ownership”.

Clegg's soundbite is illiterate even in its own terms. John Lewis workers do not own shares in the company. It is a mutual company, without shareholders, in which workers receive a payout every year. Whatever you think of that model, it is not actually what Clegg is advocating. Clegg wants a few more workers to get shares in private companies. And of course that begs the question: how, with declining real wages and living standards, are workers going to acquire these shares?

Clegg likens what he's trying to do to the Thatcher government's expansion of share ownership in the 1980s. That's an apt comparison. What happened then was that more middle-class people and even a few better-off workers got a few shares — at the same time as real living standards fell and the main outposts of working-class control and democracy within British society were demolished. Indeed the distribution of shares was often linked to privatisation (of British Telecom, for instance).

The figures show the reality of Clegg's call for “well-rewarded employees” and “responsible capitalism”, and David Cameron's calls for “popular, democratic capitalism”. (Apparently when Clegg launched his “campaign”, in front of an audience of City bankers, he asked who in the room was in favour of “irresponsible capitalism”. As the *Guardian's* Simon Hoggart commented: “No, none of them did, of course not. But I'll bet some of them thought it.”)

Average real wages have fallen 3.5 percent, while senior managers have gained by 7 percent and CEOs/directors by



Clegg wants a few more workers to own shares in private companies... while living standards for most fall, inequality increases and bankers continue to draw huge bonuses.

15 percent. The economy is on the brink of another recession and many predictions suggest that next year unemployment will approach three million. Meanwhile the banks are preparing to pay billions in bonuses — for instance a predicted £10 million for Barclay's Bob Diamond.

In his Mansion House speech, Nick Clegg apparently cited the key vested interest he wants to take on as the trade unions! That tells you everything you need to know.

Beyond the cynicism and hypocrisy of the Tories and Lib

Dems, what should socialists say about cooperatives?

There is a lot of buzz among Labour politicians about “the cooperative model”. This is posed as an alternative to the Tories' privatisation agenda. But in fact it is also an alternative to the socialist demand for publicly-owned, publicly-funded services run under democratic control.

The point about cooperatives is that they typically operate in the market, facing constant pressures to function more and more like ordinary capitalist businesses or go under.

The Cooperative, which runs many supermarkets and other businesses, for instance, was founded by workers as part of the labour movement. But today, despite its lack of shareholders, it is hardly distinguishable from a normal capitalist firm. Its workers certainly do not see much difference; the GMB union has clashed more than once with Coop management. (Talk to anyone who's worked at John Lewis for a similar, but worse, picture.)

As Marx pointed out, cooperative businesses created by workers' struggles can have value in providing an example that capitalism is not the only way of doing things. One of the best modern examples is the cooperatives set up in the occupied factories and workplaces which emerged in Argentina after the 2001 economic crisis. But tellingly the most developed and “revolutionary” example, the Zanon ceramics factory in Neuquén, has demanded ownership by the state (combined with continued workers' control) because they do not want to operate in the market.

This is a world away from what the Labour politicians have in mind. When Vestas wind turbine workers on the Isle of Wight occupied their factory and demanded nationalisation to stop it closing, then Energy Secretary Ed Miliband would not touch it. The point is that this wing of the Labour Party sees cooperatives as something counterposed to public ownership.

At the same time that he praised workers' cooperatives, Marx also argued that they cannot conceivably replace the capitalist economy, bit by bit.

And the idea that they can provide a real alternative at a time of huge ruling-class offensive against the most basic working-class rights is delusional.

ey. We say tax the rich!

that much of the wealth of the rich is not hard cash which could easily be switched to other purposes.

That is partly true. Some of their wealth is houses, cars, and so on, which could be redirected to social purposes. Some of it is “fictitious capital”. It is pieces of paper, shares, bonds, and so on, which are essentially tickets to shares in future surplus value, i.e., in future wealth-production.

On the latest figures (2006-8), total individual wealth in Britain was about £9,000 billion. That was made up of £3,500 billion in property wealth and £1,000 billion in other physical assets; £3,500 billion in private pension wealth; and £1,000 billion in financial wealth.

The total of notes and coins in circulation is £63 billion (latest figures, December 2011).

That total has not been shrinking. It has gone up about 26% since mid-2008, with the Bank of England pushing to get more notes and coins in the hands of the banks so as to limit the economic downturn.

Capitalist crises are not caused by simple lack of cash in circulation. If there were such a lack, then the government could easily fix it just by printing more notes.

WEALTH

Most financial wealth is not held as notes or coins. People holding large amounts of shares or bonds are not holding cash which could otherwise be spent on social goals.

They are, in essence, holding social power: certificates which enable them to grab a share of future wealth production, and which embody the capitalist imperatives shaping future production according to the priorities of profit and revenues for the wealthy.

How can it be that we see scarcities of cash all around us — in our own pockets and purses, in our neighbours’ and evidently in the tills of the thousands of shops in working-class areas that have shut in recent years — and yet the total of cash in circulation has increased substantially?

The gap is not all, or mostly, explained by the rich spending more, though they have done that. It is mostly just that the cash is circulating more slowly.

Businesses usually keep as small a cash reserve as they can. If they have more revenue than they want to invest straight away, they buy shares, bonds, and other financial assets that yield them at least limited profits. But currently businesses in Britain are holding about £70 billion in cash (mostly in electronic form, in bank accounts, rather than in notes and coins).

Worried about the economic crisis, they are holding more cash so as to have bigger buffers against sudden calamities. Banks, too, are holding more cash in reserve, and lending out proportionally less.

That is how capitalist downturns work: reduced market demand makes firms and banks hold on to more cash, and extend less credit; and that, in turn, reduces market demand further.

The answer to the crisis is not just to tax the rich (though that will be a start), and not just to talk vaguely about more “responsible” and “moral” variants of capitalism, but to combat and replace the whole logic of capitalism, a system that makes the lives of the many depend on the profit priorities of the few.

Some people argue that whatever the justices or injustices, the government has no choice but to fix its budget deficit, and if it did things like taxing the rich heavily or expropriating the banks, then the world financial markets would strike it down. Financiers would refuse to buy British bonds (IOUs), and so any good results from taxing the rich would be immediately overwhelmed.

It’s true: today’s huge, fast-moving, global financial markets, where trillions flow across borders every day, can cripple

governments very quickly.

Nevertheless, even this government could be pushed to delay and reduce social cuts, and to levy some more taxes on the rich. It’s not pushing against the limits of what the global financial markets will allow. Current policies reflect high finance being a more powerful lobby against taxes in its area than the labour movement is against cuts in ours, much more than the limits put on individual governments by global markets.

FLIGHT

Of course, a government taxing the rich really heavily would suffer a flight of capital as much as or more than one running big budget deficits.

The only answer to the power of global finance is to get workers’ governments which will take over high finance, put it under public ownership and democratic control, stop the free flow of capital across borders, and create new forms of cross-border economic ties based on working-class cooperation and solidarity. A big fightback here, flagging up radical alternatives, will encourage resistance elsewhere in Europe, and vice versa. The crisis is global; it would be foolish to think we can deal with it by working-class action only within the framework of single countries.

Our immediate demands should include an outline workers’ plan for the crisis:

- Sack the bank bosses — for a single, publicly-owned, democratically controlled banking, pensions and mortgage service.
- Jobs for all — fight job losses, cut work hours, expand public services.
- Inflation-proof wages, pensions and benefits; attack inequality.
- Decent homes for all.
- Stop and reverse privatisation — top quality public services for all — tax the rich!
- Open the bosses’ books! Fight for workers’ control!
- Fight for democracy; and, most of all, for the replacement of the anti-trade union laws with a positive charter of workers’ rights (to unionise, strike, picket, take solidarity action, etc.).
- For a sustainable economy — nationalise energy and transport, develop “workers’ plans”.
- **For a workers’ government — a government based on and accountable to a revived and democratised labour movement, and serving the working class as loyally as the coalition serves the bosses and bankers.**

New Unionism: how workers can fight back

Saturday 18 February, 11.30-5.30 at Highgate Newtown Community Centre, London N19 5DQ

Book tickets (£15/£8/£4) online: workersliberty.org/newunionism

In the late 1880s, workers — often unskilled or semi-skilled, often migrants or working in casualised environments — organised militant industrial unions to fight their bosses. After 40 years of limited struggles, this movement put working-class power back onto the political agenda. **Can we build a New Unionism for the 21st century that transforms and revolutionises the modern labour movement?**

Speakers and sessions:

- **Louise Raw** (author of *Striking A Light*) and **Jill Mountford**: From the Bryant & May matchwomen’s strike to the Cradley Heath Chainmakers’ strike — how women organised
- **Colin Waugh** (Editorial Board, “Post-16 Educator”, and author of a pamphlet on the Plebs League): The movement for working-class self-education
- Reading “The Troublemakers’ Handbook”: the *Labor Notes* guide to organising at work today, with *Labor Notes* founder **Kim Moody**
- **Sam Greenwood** and **Martin Thomas** (Workers’ Liberty): Finding a political voice: from New Unionism to Labour Representation
- **Charlie McDonald** and **Cathy Nugent** (Workers’ Liberty): How socialists organised: the life of Tom Mann
- **Ruth Cashman** (Lambeth Unison, pc), **Mick Duncan** (Unite organiser, pc), and others (tbc) discuss “organising the unorganised today”.
- What came next: The Great Unrest, with socialist activist and historian **Edd Mustill**
- **New Unionism 2012?** A panel discussion with working-class activists, including **Eamonn Lynch** (RMT, tube driver victimised for union activity and reinstated following a militant campaign)



Creche • cheap food • bookstalls

Verse against the odds

Jill Mountford reviews *The Treason of the Intellectuals, and other political verse* by Sean Matgamna

This collection includes 60-odd pieces of political verse written over the last quarter-century, most of them originally published in *Solidarity* or in one of its forerunners.

To devote yourself to the cause of the self-emancipation of humanity, to revolutionary socialism, in an epoch of catastrophes for that project, is to expose the heart as well as the mind to the corrosions of repeated setback, disappointment and defeat. Some of the pieces in this collection celebrate working-class struggle and the great working-class victory in 1917. Many explore the experience of defeat and the aftermath.

They represent the work of “the heart” as well as of the mind in engaging with these corrosive forces — the loss and disgust, the anger and hatred, the love, the hope, the vulnerabilities of the point of view that sees all of humanity as its family.

In search for a standpoint that can contain that burden without breaking, you have to work on it, tend to it... to interrogate thought and feeling as they are fused and lived in the subsoil of politics. The disciplines of political verse can provide the space to do that.

Two pieces here, “Remember” and “In Assisi”, embody the keynote theme and motif that binds the collection together: the moment of youth in which the “moment of the future” is glimpsed and then looked back on, even when “youth-set Truth” becomes “afraid to brave despair”.

These pieces and others in this collection urge readers to arm themselves against fear and despair by reconquering the moments when “fear did not unnerve high hope” and “douse the blaze”.

There are many “Phoenix”-like images in the collection. In one of the longer pieces, “Sunday before war”, we see the bad Phoenix, a despair that takes flight and hovers above us. Helicopters will rise from fires fed by “oil-fields, cities, seas and babies”.

The war in question is the first war against Iraq in 1991. A cold winter morning in Whitechapel market sets the scene for anguish about the impending catastrophe of war to be, expressed in verse. “Swirling blades” are rehearsing for the coming destruction above “mad ripper Jack’s wrecked lanes”. The verbal association links the individual butchery by the maniac serial killer to the serial butchery of an imperialist power. The maniac scattered the remains of women on Whitechapel’s pavements. Class society scatters the remains of the old, the sick, the “wholly dispossessed” on those same streets.

The piece entitled “I learn to tell the time” is a reflection on human time. Here a family are remembered sharing time and losing time. Class society in general and capitalism in particular are thieves of human time:

“Hard times: she has gone back again to serve
In the workhouse hospital for seven nights
A week; two kids, snatched sleep, too many fights.”
An exhausted mother, “her sleep is heavy all around us”.
A father close to breakdown. “She can not last for long, nor
can his nerve”; but time is found to “teach me to unlock, To
‘read’, the secret signs on our old clock”.

The desperate search for work will steal the father’s time with his family:

“For years we measured time after he went
By the ticking of the money wires he sent.”

Over the 140 pages of this collection, which includes a prose reflection on Catholicism in Ireland in the author’s childhood in the 1940s and early 50s, we have a sustained engagement with history and memory and time. Here is an

honest record of fears, disgusts, delights and hopes; but, above all, it is a record of memory as a source of regeneration of political will. Memory as the source for the birth and re-birth of the revolutionary phoenix.

The writer “refuses to forget” why he entered into a long combat with the exploiters of the working class and the enemies of human self-emancipation everywhere. This collection is the record of that combat on the level of emotion, memory, promise, doubt and hope.

One of the pieces, “Collage in a bleak April”, incorporates the words of the American Trotskyist James Cannon:

Cannon knew:
The thing that inspires life,
That makes life worth the living
In face of all the dangers,
Uncertainties
Insecurities
Calamities
Disappointments,
Is to have committed one’s own self
To the effort to change it.

The long piece on James Connolly cites the words with which Connolly ended his letters: “Hope and Fight”.

Those words neatly sum up the politics of this collection, too. These days there is widespread prejudice against verse, and even more so against political verse. Fight it! Check out this collection.

Politics?

“Politics”? Talking out
Of both sides of your mouth,
Reining in, when you want
To shout and jeer and taunt;
Saying half, or less,
Meaning “No”, mouthing “Yes”:
There everything is tact,
Ideas artefact;
Obtuseness, muddle, fudge:
The greatest crime to judge
Or try to think things through,
To tell plain truths — say “Boo!”
Dare to! Diplomacy,
Is all that here is free!
Where everything is tact
You need a Clean Air Act.
Give me knives, guns, half-bricks,
But give me Lenin’s politics!

(After an evening spent negotiating with Labour Party Marxists gone native.)



Sean Matgamna (taken in the early 1990s when most of the pieces in the book were written)

SOPA: “a baby-step towards something worse”

By Edd Mustill

The passage of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA) through the US Congress has been temporarily postponed.

The bills would give the US government wide-ranging powers to act against web-based copyright-infringement. One of SOPA’s major effects would be to introduce prison sentences of up to five years for the streaming of copyrighted material. Websites containing user-uploaded content could find themselves liable for the actions of their users, something which, in the words of liberal commentator Jon Stewart, would “break the internet”.

The bill’s most high profile corporate backers have been from the film, music and pharmaceutical industries (the latter are concerned about the use of the internet to import cheaper prescription drugs from Canada). Because SOPA would allow the US Justice Department to seek court orders against websites based in other countries, there is concern that it could precipitate a protectionist “trade war” in the field of intellectual property. Various bodies of the European Union have already condemned the bill.

The AFL-CIO and American unions representing workers in the “creative industries” have expressed their support for the legislation, on this protectionist basis. A joint union statement released last year said: “Without proactive measures like the Stop Online Piracy Act, rogues sites will continue to siphon away wages and benefits from members of the creative community.”

But some union members have put together a petition calling for their unions to oppose the act. One member of the Screen Actors’ Guild says: “I’m a SAG member saying that unions have no business supporting legislation that could harm free speech and the free flow of information. The internet has become an important organising tool for anyone speaking out against the status quo, and we can’t pretend that this bill isn’t a baby-step towards something far worse.”

Websites opposed to the bill, including Wikipedia, staged an internet “strike”, taking themselves down for a day on 18 January. The next day, the US Justice Department took down file-sharing site Megaupload, in what it claimed was an unconnected move. This in turn provoked an attack by the hacker group Anonymous on many US government sites.

The internet is now a political battleground, but the sides aren’t arrayed along traditional lines. SOPA is supported by Bush-style neo-cons, huge multinationals and much of organised labour. It is opposed by civil liberties groups, Tea Party supporters, and some well known left-liberal artists. The most high-profile political opposition has come from ultra-libertarian right-winger Ron Paul, currently seeking the Republican nomination to challenge Barack Obama in this year’s presidential election.

The SOPA saga mixes up many different issues. Artists need to make a living, but the broad legal definitions in the law raise fears of a Great Firewall being built in the USA and other countries, more likely to stifle creativity and free speech than stifle piracy.



“The Treason of the Intellectuals, and other political verse” by Sean Matgamna

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ALL PROCEEDS GO TO THE AWL FUNDRAISING DRIVE

Lies, anti-semitism and conspiracy theories

Cathy Nugent reviews *The Prague Cemetery* by Umberto Eco

Umberto Eco's protagonist is a spy (who is not particular about which state police he serves), a forger, an agent provocateur and a stool pigeon.

In other words, Simone Simonini is the worst kind of low life, and as revolting a fictional character as you will ever encounter. Simonini is an invention. Every other character in Eco's book is real. All the events — whether as backdrop or integral to the plot — really happened. As the text is sometimes a pastiche of 19th-century adventure story it doesn't read like history.

We meet Simonini in the late 1890s. Old, physically failing and suffering from memory loss he lives in the upstairs apartment of a junk shop, situated in one of the smelliest districts of Paris.

Simonini's only passions in life are hatred of all other human beings and haute cuisine. No greater hatred does he have than hatred for Jews.

Ironic then that he finds himself following the advice of a Jewish psychiatrist and is writing down his life history in order to "recall" the trauma which has seemingly destroyed his memory.

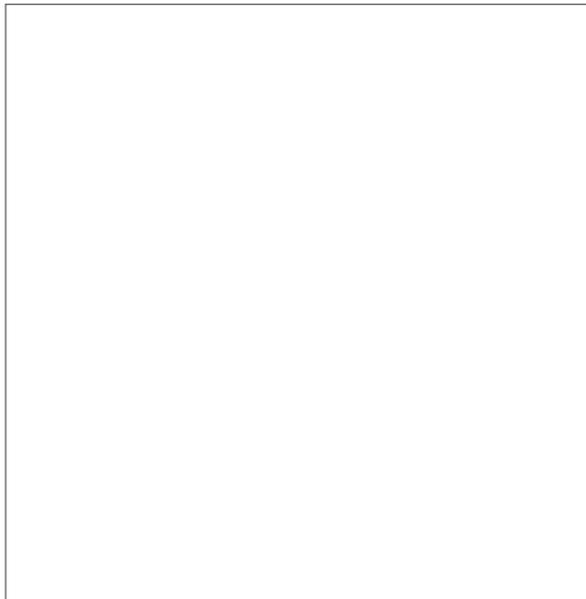
As a reader you will find yourself wishing that Simonini had given in to blissful ignorance of his past and had not bothered to take you through the revolting sewers (literally, at times) of his life led at the edges of bourgeois existence.

Simonini's journal (with interpolations from a doppelgänger!) form the basis of Eco's retelling of a historical story — how many individuals, events and political circumstances shaped modern anti-semitism.

From Italian unification to the Dreyfus Affair this is a rambling and sometimes bewildering retelling. But the point is to show how Simonini — the spreader of lies — operates. How lies themselves operate in constructing perceived "reality".

As he gains experience as a forger of documents to implicate individuals and groups (Masons and Jews) in conspiracies and crimes Simonini begins to plot the forging of a document which he thinks will bring together All The Best Lies Ever Told About The Jews — this will become *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. A document which, as we know, spreads lies about a comprehensive plan for world domination by Jewish leaders.

The *Protocols* are in fact a forgery put together in 1897 by Mathieu Golovinski, an agent of the Tsarist police working



1920 US publication of "The Protocols"

in France (who later went over to the Bolsheviks) and republished later in Russia. In 1905 it was used as state diversion to working-class unrest.

The *Protocols* were literally "put together" — big chunks of the forgery were taken almost word for word from an obscure book by the French satirist Maurice Joly. That book — *The Dialogue Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* was itself an attack on Napoleon III. Its anatomisation of political dictatorship lent itself to the *Protocols* "storyline" of Jewish world domination. Other ideas in the *Protocols* were stolen from 19th-century fictional sources.

The Prague cemetery of Eco's title is a scene from a novel by a German anti-semitic, Hermann Goedsche. The cemetery is where representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel come together to plot taking over the world. But the scene (not in an anti-semitic form) was copied from an earlier novel by Alexandre Dumas! Yet "the Prague cemetery meeting" is reported as fact in subsequent anti-semitic pamphlets.

Somehow this utter rubbish, based on the flotsam and jetsam of swashbuckling novels and recycled, obscure politi-

cal tracts, became a vital propaganda tool for anti-semites, most notably for the Nazis in their war on European Jews. The fact that this forgery really happened makes Umberto Eco's dramatic fictional presentation of the story very important.

The Chief Rabbi of Rome criticised Eco for writing *The Prague Cemetery* and potentially giving new life to the *Protocols*. But people need to know.

Last November we were shocked to see the book on the *Morning Star* stall at the Labour Representation Committee event. It was, it turned out, an inadvertent inclusion by the stall holder who had never heard of the *Protocols*.

Understandable? No, not really. As Will Eisner describes so well in his graphic history *The Plot*, the *Protocols* have been used time and again throughout the 20th century and into the next by powerful groups, governments and reactionary movements at key moments when they wanted a scapegoat.

In 1930s Argentina... as quotations in USSR anti-Israel propaganda... around the rise of the NF in 1970s England... in 1988 by Hamas... as required reading in some Mexican Catholic schools... in 2002 in an Egyptian state-sponsored serialised souped-up TV version... cited approvingly in an article on the website of Iranian propaganda channel Press TV in 2011...

All despite the *Protocols* being proved beyond any doubt over and over again to be a forgery, in a Swiss court case, by the US Senate, and many academic accounts (including by Eco himself).

What helps keep the *Protocols* alive is the continuing power of conspiracy theories — on both the right and the so-called left in politics. If people want to believe made-up rubbish they will, even when it flies in the face of all available (and easily verifiable) evidence. Those who try to demolish the conspiracy theory, point out the evidence, etc, will be assumed to be part of the conspiracy. That, as Umberto Eco points, out is the horrendously a priori logic which has been used to assess the *Protocols*: "The *Protocols* could be fake, but they say exactly what the Jews think, and must therefore be considered authentic."

People not only have enemies but also need Enemies with a capital E. Unfortunately that drive and need infects the left — why else do they love those that hate our enemies? Chavez against the US ruling class. Ahmedinejad against the world.

And in that kind of storyline, the truth goes out of the window.

Fight the power.. with counterpower?

Daniel Rawnsley reviews *Counterpower* by Tim Gee

Tim Gee claims to have "a single idea which explains why social movements succeed or fail". Two hundred pages later I am not convinced.

Gee's theory of "counterpower" is that "the resistance of the oppressed is a major driver in history". Agreed. That is the principle which guides my politics and activism. But here the idea is developed in a confusing direction. "Power is when the few control the many; 'counterpower' is when the many resist the control of the few." But from the historical examples Gee uses it is evident that he is interested in winning genuine social change — to talk about just resisting is problematic.

Gee's "counterpower" is the power used by a social movement to force concessions or change from a government or in society, that is, the power (leverage) exercised by our side. Using the term "counterpower" and focusing on this alone obscures the struggle for power between the oppressed and oppressors; it suggests that an alternative form of power exists alongside this conflict and that, potentially, all we need to do is grasp this alternative form of power, thereby giving up on the fight for... power. Yet the way Gee deals with his historical examples suggests that this is not his perspective!

He advocates confrontation and negotiating for reforms, showing a tacit understanding of the struggle to exert working-class power over capitalism, to *take power away from the capitalists*.

Gee describes three distinct types of "counterpower": "Idea counterpower... can be exercised by challenging accepted truths, refusing to obey and finding new channels of communication". I would call this "propaganda". It could even be critical theory. However, I think it obscures things to pretend that "idea counterpower" is fundamentally different from what Gee calls the "idea power" of governments and business.

"Physical counterpower... can occasionally mean literally

fighting back, or, alternatively, non-violently placing our bodies in the way of injustice."

Gee argues against "absolute pacifism", that is, against allowing an opponent to rain blows down on a movement in the belief that demonstrative passivity changes minds. He is, however, very firmly in favour of non-violent direct action, arguing that "the greater the role of violence in social change, the lesser the democracy of the post-transition settlement". He cites the "Bolshevik coup in 1917" and the Libyan rebels as examples of failure.

Leaving aside the ahistorical lumping together of the 1917 October revolution and the Russian civil war that soon followed and the branding of this combination as a "coup", Gee ignores the fact that context and conditions can make certain events inevitable. The military might of Qaddafi, coupled with his determination to crush all opposition and the absence of any organised labour movement made civil war unavoidable in Libya.

Gee's notion of an "economic counterpower" is underdeveloped, but its presence is important. It is defined as "strikes, boycotts, democratic regulation and ethical consumption". Gee does not say whether some of these tactics are more useful than others. I would argue that a strike is more useful than a boycott, and that ethical consumption is only an expensive way of making yourself feel a little better about the naked exploitation of capitalism. It is positive, however, that Gee accepts the importance of economic power as a method of fighting back.

STAGES

Gee sees struggles as corresponding to stages. I would have liked to see this idea a little more developed.

Do these different stages require different tactics or is it just an attempt to compartmentalise and tidy up the process of class struggle? I got the sense that Gee was trying to lay a theory over historical events, rather than searching for the logic that emerges from them.

Gee tends to see movements as homogeneous masses

struggling toward the same goal — that drastically limits his analysis. Take this assessment of the women's suffrage movement, for example.

For Millicent Fawcett's Suffragists, the 1918 victory was testament to decades of constitutional campaigns for change. For Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst it reflected the delayed gains from their militant strategy. For Sylvia Pankhurst and other radicals, the eventual extension of the ballot was a concession by those in power in order to prevent more fundamental change. To an extent they were all right. The Suffragists embodied the "Co-ordination Stage", the Suffragettes moved things to the "Confrontation Stage", while the socialists aided the "Consolidation Stage". In the process, the perfect dynamics were constructed to achieve a major step toward the change for which they had so long striven.

But these different groups were fighting for different aims: there was a conflict between "votes for all women" and "votes for ladies", and the grassroots agency of working-class women was opposed by some sections of the movement.

The strength of Gee's book is its idea that a great many tactics and methods need to be combined in order to build effective campaigns. But Gee tries to raise this "insight" to the level of theory, and claims to have found a complete solution to the big question "how can we win". He looks in history to find examples to fit his theory. In so doing he makes omissions and slight misrepresentations, several of which I noticed in his account of the campaigns I had read about or been involved in.

If this were the first radical book I had read it would have had a positive effect on me, encouraging me to think that change from below is not only possible, but desirable. But I would also have picked up a number of confused and counter-productive ideas and been misled about at least some of the history of these movements.

Tim Gee is asking the right questions, but doesn't deliver many good answers.

Chinese workers fight for democracy

By Camila Bassi

I was leading a meeting last November at Liverpool University's Guild of Students on the question of a socialist response to the politics of multiculturalism and assimilation.

During the discussion, the predominance of "cultural relativism" in left academia became explicit — perhaps, I wonder now, a liberal postcolonial hangover from the crimes of the British Empire.

I recalled a special edition of the BBC's "Question Time" programme, broadcast from Shanghai in 2005.

When an official of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was posed a question about universal suffrage and democratic rights from the audience, the CCP official replied (I paraphrase): "Universal suffrage is a Western understanding of democracy, in China we do democracy differently." So, in my mind at least, a postcolonial liberal hangover found its way into the hands of the Chinese ruling class for its own convenience.

I relayed this to the meeting, retorting to the cultural relativists: "When students and workers in Beijing and other major cities in China rose up in defiance against the Party and for a democratic revolution in 1989, it was because our class the world over shares important fundamental values."

Recently, an advisor to Mao Zedong's successor, Deng Xiaoping, remarked: "If China had applied this so-called ... liberal electoral democracy we would have a peasant government. It would be very nationalist, they would launch war against Taiwan or Japan. The current leadership... is cautious and moderate in its foreign policy, which is in China's interest, and which is actually also good for the western interests."

Professor Weiwei is the author of *The China Wave: the Rise of a Civilizational State*, in which he claims that China is an "exceptional civilisation". Xiaoping, one should recall, was the architect of China's era of opening and reform, a strictly economic not political state-engineered project which has fuelled its economic growth since the 1990s especially.

Western critics of "the China model", Weiwei reasons, should stop pointing out the country's supposed shortcomings.

So what about, I wonder, the Chinese working class and peasantry. Should they stop pointing out the shortcomings of this China model too? Of course, certain political "truths"



Foxconn workers recently threatened suicide over conditions

that are proclaimed by the bourgeoisies the world over class-cleanse the actual conditions of reality.

Alongside Weiwei's diatribe let's consider a report produced by *China Labor Bulletin (CLB)*, showing that the workers' movement in China during the period of 2009-2011 has been revitalised by a new generation of migrant workers demanding better pay and working conditions and refusing to comply with the brutal exploitation that a previous generation endured: "These young activists have not only won noticeable concessions from their employers, they have also forced the government and trade unions to reassess their labour and social policies."

CLB states that the protests over the past three years or so have generated "an embryonic collective bargaining system" in the country; the challenge remaining, to make that system effective and sustainable.

Let's consider also that in 2011, the election year for deputy posts in the People's Congress, there was an upsurge of independent, grassroots candidates that the CCP suppressed with renewed vigour.

The *Epoch Times* reports, for instance, the case of a retired professor from Shandong University. Soon after declaring his independent candidacy, he was subjected to the local authorities destroying all of his election materials, ordering police to prevent him from accessing the university campus, and threatening his supporters with forced labour imprisonment, while the university authorities confiscated his home of 26 years.

Not to be mistaken for an isolated incident, the *Epoch Times* also reports: "Beijing police have taken nine independent candidates into custody and 'disappeared' some of them in September. Some independent candidates said their names were erased from the ballot; some candidates' web-

sites and personal social media sites were shut down just prior to the elections."

In the year of the Arab Spring, the democratic desires of the Chinese working class have made the State increasingly nervous and, as such, it has readily applied forceful repression.

LAND SEIZURES

An escalated stand-off in Wukan village, since September 2011, between villagers and local CCP officials is another example of China's escalating democracy struggles.

The spark was land seizures, with the villagers protesting against the sale of their land to developers and lack of compensation. What's more, during this time, the villagers have experimented in self-government (a universal class experiment in grassroots democracy echoed in history):

"The democratically elected village council has not only led the villagers to peacefully defend themselves against invasion by the police, they have also given help to the poor.

"The whole village of over 10,000 people is in good order. There are no thieves and people don't even close their doors at night. There are no more village cadres bullying villagers, and people help one another. All villagers discuss everything together. Under the "anarchy" of self-government, the management of everything is much better than in the past.

"The people of China are watching and in Wukan they see clearly: Without the Communist Party, life is better." (*Epoch Times*)

Clearly nervous of infection, the CCP is aiming to "negotiate" some sort of agreement (at best, dampener, at worst, violent suppression) with the villagers. The death of Xue Jinbo on 11 December while in local police custody (the police claiming he died of "sudden illness") stalls such a deal. Meanwhile one of the organisers of a group named the "Wukan Young Enthusiasts" blogs:

"Today I can only say I have seen the light of the dawn, but have yet to be embraced by the warm sun. ...I'll run as far away as I can. Who knows whether they will be handing down punishment later."

Cultural relativists pay heed. To the Western liberal left-wing variety, mull over the sacrifices people make for universal political emancipation; sacrifices which are brought down upon them by the iron fist of the totalitarian variety of relativism in a left-wing velvet glove..

Matt Lygate: the passing of a Scottish leftist



Matt Lygate — founding-member of the Workers Party of Scotland (Marxist-Leninist) in the 1960s, bank-robber in the 1970s, and briefly a political celebrity in the early 1980s — died last week.

Born in Govan in Glasgow in 1938, Lygate emigrated to New Zealand in 1959 in order to avoid national service. After his return to Scotland six years later he was increasingly drawn into the political orbit of dissident Communist Party members and Scottish nationalists.

In 1967 he became a founding member of the Workers Party of Scotland (Marxist-Leninist). The WPS declared itself to be "based fundamentally upon the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels and the subsequent development of Marxism by Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tsetung, Enver Hoxha and John Maclean".

The WPS were also great admirers of William Wallace: "We have persistently upheld the memory and example of our heroic and martyred William Wallace, a highly successful pioneer in guerilla warfare because he was a man of and for the people."

And it helpfully made its own contribution towards the revival of Gaelic: "We have consistently encouraged the Gaelic language and have published selections from the writings of Mao Tsetung in that language."

In 1969 Lygate stood as the WPS candidate in a by-election in the Gorbals — a constituency rich in historical symbolism for the WPS. Lygate won just seven votes.

Despite "the emergence of fascist and neo-fascist bodies and politics in Britain, as a reflection of the crisis of western capitalism," the WPS recognised that its role as "the van-

guard revolutionary party of the workers of Scotland" might not be immediately apparent. Its paper, *Scottish Vanguard*, soberly commented in 1970: "Of course, we do not expect all the workers here in Scotland to assimilate immediately the advanced ideas prevailing amongst the workers and peasants of China."

In 1971 Lygate, by now the WPS national chairperson, and another WPS member were arrested for (alleged) involvement in a series of armed bank robberies, after a police raid on the WPS bookshop which he ran had uncovered the proceeds of the robberies.

At his trial in 1972 Lygate dismissed his defence and attempted, very unsuccessfully, to emulate John Maclean's famous Speech from the Dock.

After the judge's imposition of a punitive prison sentence of 24 years — worse than for murder, and four times as long as the usual sentence for armed robbery — Lygate told the public gallery: "I will be released very soon, when the revolution comes."

But the WPS was deeply embarrassed by the trial's revelations: "[The two WPS members] seriously misused, without any authority from the Party, the bookshop premises in Glasgow and they maintained a close association with non-party persons for purposes contrary to the Party's interests [i.e. robbing banks]."

It was 1983 before Lygate was released from prison, following a campaign the previous year which focused on the excessive length of the sentence imposed on him.

Lygate claimed then to have evolved politically: "I am not a Trotskyist. I was a Maoist in the 60s. But now I am a Marxist-Leninist and an anarchist in the true sense." Whether his politics actually had changed is open to debate.

According to a report of one conference which he attended in November of 1983: "As befits a conference attended by such veteran anti-imperialist supporters of the Asian socialist countries as Comrade Matt Lygate, delegates repeatedly stressed the vanguard role of the Asian communist tradition and the teachings of the great leaders Com-

rade Mao Zedong and Comrade Kim Il Sung.

"A reception was held in a warm atmosphere overflowing with proletarian internationalism, at which the delegates joined together in singing revolutionary songs including the 'Song of General Kim Il Sung', 'Scots wha hae', 'the Soldier's Song' and 'the Internationale'."

In the early 1990s Lygate campaigned against the poll tax, subsequently claiming to have been the initial driving force behind the non-payment campaign, before dropping out of politics and suffering from increasingly poor health.

It is easy to portray Lygate and the WPS as Dave Spartesque caricatures of revolutionaries, politically incoherent even by their own standards, but with the added frisson of a record of bank robberies. And such a portrayal is certainly an accurate one.

But at the same time, Lygate's politics were typical of the politics of a section of the Scottish far left in his time: a wild and incoherent attempt to marry up "Marxism" with Scottish nationalism, Irish Republicanism, Third Worldism, peasant vanguardism and (in some cases) non-Soviet varieties of Stalinism.

Confronted with the broad sweep of the burgeoning "World Revolution" and the upsurge of armed struggle in the Third World, that section of the left largely dismissed the British trade unions and — even more so — the Labour Party as irrelevant backwaters of political reaction (at a time when both unions and Labour were more combative).

The strange political brew of Lygate and his WPS was really only a cruder and less "sophisticated" version of the admiration of Third Worldist guerillaism expressed by even relatively orthodox elements of the Trotskyism movement.

In fact, as far as the bank robberies were concerned, Lygate could have argued with some degree of justification that he was merely taking such politics to their logical conclusion.

Southampton battle not over

By Stewart Ward

Trade unions at Southampton City Council have declared that their battle with Tory bosses over job losses and pay cuts is “continuing”, as the dispute stretches into its twelfth month.

Workers are particularly aggrieved that the council is spending millions opening the new “Sea City Museum” while claiming it has no choice but to cut workers’ pay.

Unison Branch Secretary, Mike Tucker, commented, “Whether introduced by

Conservative or Labour Councils, Unison members will not accept pay cuts. While the council wastes millions on a museum the city doesn’t need, workers are facing savage pay cuts. Unison members will continue to take action until

nationally agreed pay levels are restored.”

Ian Woodland, Unite regional officer, said: “It is a disgrace that one year on, workers at Southampton City Council are having to continue their industrial action. This dispute is

keep on fighting until the council sees sense. The council should not underestimate their willingness to protest against these unnecessary pay cuts.”

A January meeting of shop stewards and workplace representatives of Unison and Unite agreed to continue the ongoing action short of strikes and have organised a lobby of the council on 15 February.

Unions have also named 10 April as a date for all-out action by all directly-employed workers at the council, and will consult members over what form the action should take.

being driven by a political agenda as the Tories have wanted to attack our members’ terms and conditions ever since they won control of the council in 2008.

“Our members are united, angry and determined and have vowed to

PCS stalls in pensions campaign

By a civil servant

The “refusenik” unions in the pensions battle will meet this week to discuss the next steps... even if those steps are just to stand still.

The National Executive of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), although aware of the University and College Union’s decision to set 1 March as the next pension strike day, has decided not to put a definite date to the “refusenik” meeting, and has not committed to supporting the

UCU’s proposal. The PCS, on paper the most stridently “rejectionist” of all national unions, will therefore essentially attend the meeting in listening mode.

PCS has also agreed to consult members over whatever package comes out of the civil service pension talks; these discussions being concluded in mid-February. It is likely that this “consultation” will take the form of a ballot.

It is hard to see PCS agreeing to take action on 1 March whilst consulting

members on the outcome of negotiations that don’t conclude until mid-February. PCS activists will eagerly anticipate what the union’s recommendation for how members should vote in that ballot will be.

Another straw in the wind against action on 1 March is that the next NEC has been arranged for 9 February; that doesn’t leave much time to rev up members from a standing start.

So it all seems clear that, for PCS at least, the pension fight has at best been postponed for a while.

Remploy workers to strike

By Darren Bedford

Workers at two Remploy sites will strike on 26 January against the semi-privatisation of their factories.

Remploy, a government-owned manufacturing company established in 1945 specifically to provide protected employment for disabled workers, has faced a number of attacks – including part-privatisations and sell-offs – in recent years. Now its Chesterfield and Springburn (Glasgow) sites face

merger with private orthotics firm Websters to create a new part-private company, R Healthcare.

As a result, non-disabled apprentices and shopfloor workers have been taken on with substantially worse pay and conditions than existing Remploy workers, effectively creating a two-tier workforce.

Send messages of support to: kevin.shand@remploy.co.uk, Philip.brannan@remploy.co.uk and jamesstribleygbyorkshire@hotmail.co.uk

Heathrow Express strike ballot

By Padraig O’Brien

Workers on the Heathrow Express (HEX), which provides fast services between central London and Heathrow Airport, began a strike ballot on 19 January.

The ballot is part of a campaign to win the reinstatement of an unfairly-dismissed colleague and to force bosses to cease a campaign of victimisation and harassment of a lead-

ing union activist.

Zahid Majid has been sacked by HEX bosses after a minor error, for which he has already taken full responsibility. Trade union rep Liaqat Ali has been subjected to what his union, the RMT, describes as “a barrage of unfounded, spurious and discriminatory allegations.”

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said: “The unfair and disproportionate punishment taken by management in both these

cases is a total miscarriage of justice. This is not a situation that can go unchallenged by RMT.

Management’s behaviour clearly demonstrates their willingness to victimise staff at the slightest provocation and no doubt they see this as payback for the successful building of a strong and militant union organisation within the company.”

Workers will also ballot for action short of a strike.

Lambeth Unison members vote to reject pensions deal. See article below.

Oil tanker drivers’ seven days of strikes

By Clarke Benitez

Oil tanker drivers working out of depots in Immingham, Kingsbury and Stockton-on-Tees have begun a week-long strike against pay cuts and attacks on terms and conditions.

The drivers, who are members of the Unite union, deliver fuel to Jet petrol station forecourts across the UK. The decision to take seven days of action was agreed at a

mass members’ meeting on 15 January, and workers will strike until 31 January. The vote to strike was 83% in favour on a 96% turnout.

The workers are employed by logistics firm Wincanton, whose employees in a Marks & Spencer distribution warehouse struck on 22 December against management attempts to create a two-tier workforce by introducing a worse pay scheme for new starters.

Unite official Matt Draper said: “Our members could not have sent a clearer message. Wincanton may well be surprised by the strength of feelings amongst its drivers, but it ignores their concerns at its peril.

“The steady erosion and the ongoing attack on the pay and terms and conditions of not only these drivers, but of all those in the industry, must stop. The drivers have had enough.”

Newsquest national pay battle moves closer

By Vicki Morris

National Union of Journalists (NUJ) chapels in the Newsquest group of papers met for a national “group chapel” on Saturday 21 January to discuss a campaign against the profitable company’s attempt to impose a pay freeze.

The journalists are trying to get hold of Newsquest trading figures for their respective areas.

Chapels could launch industrial action ballots around 24 February, when the TUC is organising a “Work your hours” day.

The group chapel was very supportive of Newsquest North and South Essex chapels.

They have already launched an industrial dispute against a pay freeze and local management’s plan to impose a single pay “anniversary” (the point in the year at which pay is renegotiated) for all editorial staff, meaning some workers would not be considered for a wage increase until June 2013.

The two chapels have had strong “yes” votes for action in ballots and are looking to put their demands to local management this week.

South Essex plan to start a work-to-rule on Monday 30 January, and could escalate to a three-day strike.

North Essex are currently discussing the form of their industrial action, but have pledged not to handle work that might be done by South Essex.

Sparks to hit NG Bailey

The rank-and-file committee leading the electricians’ battle against pay cuts and deskilling has declared a week of action targeting NG Bailey, one of the “big seven” contractors threatening to leave the national agreement.

Activists are also building for a massive yes vote in a re-run strike ballot of Unite members working for Balfour Beatty Engineering Services, which closes on 9 February.

For more info, see <http://bit.ly/wsFyDb>

Lambeth Unison votes to continue pensions fight

By a Unison member

A mass members’ meeting of the Lambeth local government branch of public sector union Unison has voted unanimously to reject the government’s pensions deal and back the campaign for a special sector conference within Unison to overturn the Local Government Service Group Executive’s decision to enter negotiations on the government’s terms.

Assistant Branch Secretary Ruth Cashman said: “Our members in Lambeth showed strong sup-

port for the strike on 30 November, and we believe that local government workers should remain united with other public sector and private sector workers in pushing for fair pensions for all.”

The meeting was one of the branch’s best-attended meetings for several years.

Lambeth Unison now joins the campaign initiated by Coventry Unison’s branch committee for a special local government conference.

Activists in Unison’s health side have also launched a similar campaign.

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

No to war and sanctions, no to the Islamic Republic: support Iranian workers!

By Cathy Nugent

The EU has agreed an oil embargo on Iran. In response Iran has threatened to close the strait of Hormuz (through which oil supplies pass). The US has said if that happens it could take military action.

The embargo might work, and Iran might back down. However Iran has other customers for its oil.

There is a possibility there will be a stumbling into a war which could ignite a series of other conflicts across the region.

The EU's embargo comes after months of standoff between Iran and the west over Iran's nuclear programme. The prospect of the clerical-fascist regime in Iran having a nuclear bomb is alarming. We oppose Iran developing nuclear weapons.

The AWL opposes war as we oppose economic sanctions now. Sanctions help the regime whip up nationalist support for the defence of Iran.

Already in trouble, the Iranian economy is now further on the slide. Iranian workers are struggling while the rich and powerful at the top of Iranian society continue to do well.

Economic sanctions will hurt the Iranian working-class. And they will also make the enormously difficult and dangerous tasks of the secular democratic and working-class forces in Iran much harder.

Socialists should oppose these sanctions and any drive to war. We must step up our solidarity with the small and embattled working-class forces in Iran who are struggling for their freedom.

Sanctions could give him a boost

Lecturers' union names new pensions strike date

By a UCU activist

The Executive of the University and College Union (UCU) has called strike action over public sector pensions for Thursday 1 March.

The vote gives a much-needed lead to the other unions involved in the public sector disputes.

A majority of 24 to 8, with one abstention, backed a motion calling for an escalation of the dispute in colleges and post-92 universities (with members in the Teachers' Pension Scheme - TPS).

UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt had recommended to the NEC that the union move to ballot members on the current offer in the government's "Heads of Agreement". But, as the motion pointed out, "the main issues in the dispute remain unresolved: the change from RPI to CPI, the increase in employee contributions, the extension of the retirement age and the abolition of the Final Salary Scheme."

Instead of delaying action with a ballot on a barely-changed offer, the NEC mandated Hunt to meet with other "rejectionist" unions in the course of the following week, and

"to propose a strategy of escalation that involves a program of coordinated rolling strike action (regional, national, etc. as appropriate) in February 2012 with other unions."

NEXT STEPS

A recalled meeting of the NEC on 10 February will hear her response and consider the next steps.

The UCU's decision is something concrete for activists across the labour movement — but particularly in Unite, the National Union of Teachers and the Public and Commercial Services Union, which have taken a more oppositional stance so far — to organise around.

Even if UCU strikes alone, activists in other unions can fight for their members to respect lecturers' picket lines at colleges and universities, maximising and broadening the impact of the UCU's action. With the increased employee contributions in public sector pension schemes due to start in April 2012, the strike date is coming dangerously late. To be effective, it must not be a single day of protest action but the start of a month-long campaign that involves rolling and selec-

tive action as well as other forms of industrial action to apply the maximum pressure to the government in the time we have left.

Sally Hunt is up for re-election as General Secretary of the UCU next month.

Her latest letter to members makes her disagreement with the NEC clear and invites both individuals and branches to contact her with their views. We can expect that in the next few weeks she will try — as in the past — to appeal to individual members over the heads of the NEC, and that the right wing of the union will present the NEC's opposition to a ballot as "not letting the members decide".

In the other half of the

UCU's pensions dispute, affecting the pre-92, "red-brick" universities, the union leadership is proposing to call off the action.

UCU negotiators are recommending (though, rumour has it, not unanimously) a suspension of the current action short of a strike in response to some minuscule concessions from the employers. The main concession is an agreement not to reduce the pension of anyone over 55 they make redundant up to October 2014. Beyond that, the offer is essentially for more talks. UCU describes this as a "significant improvement", but that's only because the union believes — and simply accepts — that there are likely to be many redun-

dancies in higher education between now and then.

Surely the response to that should be to fight redundancies, not cave in on pensions!

The decision on suspending the action in pre-92 universities will be taken by a meeting of branch representatives on 31 January.

The short notice means that only the most determined and best-organised branches will have consulted members in any meaningful way. The risk is that conservative branch committees will vote with the leadership rather than escalate the action alongside the rest of the union.

Activists in the pre-92s should put pressure on their branch representatives not to give in.

Student campaign forces government climbdown

Late on Monday 23 January, the Daily Telegraph website reported that the government has shelved its Higher Education Bill.

This Bill would have made it easier for private, for-profit companies to run courses in UK universities. It will now not be debated until at least 2013,

and may be put back even further, or lost altogether. Details are still unclear, but this decision marks a major climbdown for the Government, which is effectively junking a central plank of its education reform policy and stymying the process of privatisation of education. It has been made possible by

two years of mass protest, led in large part by the NCAFC.

The fight against the HE White Paper and the Liberal-Tory agenda for education is not yet over — but this is a milestone success that vindicates our strategy.

• More: anticuts.com

Unilever workers are prepared to take further action

By Darren Bedford

Workers at food and cleaning products manufacturer Unilever have begun an 11-day programme of rolling strike action at sites across the UK in an attempt to defeat bosses' plans to scrap their final-salary pension schemes. It is the joint strategy of the three unions involved:

Unite, USDAW and the GMB.

The plan is a bold move from workers at a company that had never seen strike action until December 2011.

Bob Sutton from Merseyside AWL reports on his visit to a local picket line:

"The picket on the production side of the Unilever plant at Port Sun-

light [Merseyside] was around 25 strong on the evening of 21 January. I asked strikers whether they'd be prepared to take further action and the answer was an emphatic yes. There also seemed to be hope that USDAW and Unite officials would come up with a strategy."

The rolling action helps maintain pressure on Unilever across the coun-

try over a sustained period and is a significant step up from the more common model of industrial action in the UK of 24 hours of token action designed merely to express dislike at something management is doing rather than actually stop it.

The strike needs an ongoing strategy for forcing Unilever bosses to abandon their pensions cuts,

rather than simply to "get them back around the negotiating table", as Unite leader Len McCluskey has stated in the press.

As private sector employers take their cue from the government's slash-and-burn policy towards public sector pensions, other private sector workers should follow Unilever workers' lead in fighting back.