

# Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



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[www.workersliberty.org](http://www.workersliberty.org)

For a workers' government

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# NOW

# BURY

Celebrating in Trafalgar Square, Saturday 13 April. Photo: Jess Hurd ([reportdigital.co.uk](http://reportdigital.co.uk))

# THATCHERISM

## 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.

Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

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

Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

### We stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
- Open borders.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.
- If you agree with us, please take some copies of *Solidarity* to sell — and join us!

### Contact us:

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# Resist student shift to right!

By Rosie Huzzard

**If a measure of a union's worth as a union is its willingness to fight for the interests of its members, then this year's NUS conference (8-10 April) saw a new low.**

The leadership and its supporters aggressively rejected any suggestion of a campaign on fees, grants/loans, education funding or how our education is structured. They voted down support for free education, dusting off the argument that it means the poor paying for rich kids to go to university.

**NATIONAL DEMO**  
**They voted down holding a national demonstration in the autumn, using their own failings in connection with last year's demo to justify this and to attack the left.**

They voted down a campaign to bring back EMAs for sixth form students. Last year, slogans like "Tax the rich" were quietly accepted before being binned, this year both "Tax the rich" and "Expropriate the banks" were defeated.

A motion to campaign for public, democratically run universities and colleges was gutted. In place of this, conference passed bland waffle about "celebrating the public value of

education" and so on.

The NUS leadership was able to get away with this because the conference as a whole was less political than in previous years. The whole feel of the thing was flatter and less political, with fewer fringe meetings, fewer stalls — fewer stupid election gimmicks, even.

There was also the growth of an element at the conference that was not just right-wing in the traditional NUS sense — broadly Blairite — but Tory-leaning. The one big defeat for the leadership a defeat from the right: on guaranteed representation for women on the NEC and conference delegations.

Into this atmosphere strode Peter Smallwood, Tory candidate for president and the NEC. Playing hard on the joke of being a fish out of water, Smallwood would have been funny — if he wasn't ap-

palling. While constantly attacking the NCAFC, the leadership clapped and cheered him (they also urged delegates not to celebrate Thatcher's death). He will very possibly get elected to the national executive and, breaking with his party's recent traditions, start to establish an organised Tory base in NUS and SUs. This is a major political threat.

The radical left has been reduced to a relatively small minority. The only left organisation that appeared as a force at the conference, with caucuses, a stall, extensive materials, a bulletin, a fringe meeting and so on was the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC).

Hundreds of delegates walked out during speeches by Tomas Evans, an SWP member and supporter of the Central Committee's handling of the

rape allegations against Martin Smith. Shereen Prasad, a dissident SWP member who explicitly criticised the party leadership in her election speech, faced no walkouts and won a much higher vote.

There is a debate within NCAFC about the usefulness of far-left activists intervening in NUS at all. Although the prospects for any radical transformation of NUS are remote, Workers' Liberty students believe intervention is still worthwhile. By intervening in conference NCAFC met new activists, publicised campaigns including the Sussex anti-privatisation struggle, organised a well-attended vigil to demand justice for Steven Simpson, and more besides.

**As well as continuing to build itself as an independent activist force on campuses, NCAFC will be continuing a debate about both intervention in NUS and the possibilities for building a federation of radical students unions.**

- Comment on the walk outs during Tomas Evans's speeches: [bit.ly/swpwalkout](http://bit.ly/swpwalkout)
- Comment on a controversy at the conference about the definition of anti-Semitism: [bit.ly/nusantisem](http://bit.ly/nusantisem)
- More on the NCAFC website: [anticuts.com](http://anticuts.com)

## New unions show unrest

groups of workers..."

Workers' Liberty has been involved in campaigns involving some new independent unions (including the Industrial Workers of the World and the Pret A Manger Staff Union, which are specifically mentioned in the report, and the Industrial Workers of Great Britain). We don't see such initiatives as an alternative to transforming the mass unions, but they can play an important role in some struggles. The proliferation of such initiatives shows that more workers are finding their struggles restricted, rather than facilitated, by mainstream unions.

**This reinforces the need to transform our movement as a whole.**

By Ollie Moore

**A recent report by Acas into the work of the Certification Office (which, among other things, maintains the official register of trade unions) identifies a "steady trickle" of new unions being established, despite a general trend of decline.**

According to the report: "These new unions appear to be motivated by, among other things... an attempt to gain improved recognition for under-represented

## EDL leader backs Ukip

By Darren Bedford

**Prominent English Defence League spokesperson Stephen Lennon (also known as Tommy Robinson) has publicly backed Ukip, calling on other "nationalist" parties not to stand against them.**

Lennon/Robinson cited

the party's platform on Europe and "Islam" as points of agreement with the EDL's own approach.

The EDL's last attempt to intervene in official politics was an alliance with the far-right British Freedom Party, which was deregistered in December 2012 after failing to submit its accounts to the Electoral Commission.

Ukip has distanced itself from the EDL, affirming that party members found to be involved in EDL activities will be expelled.

**If any kind of relationship develops on the ground between EDL divisions and Ukip branches, anti-fascists will need to be on the guard.**

# Time to sober up on Chavismo

By Pablo Velasco

**The narrow victory of Nicolás Maduro in the Venezuelan presidential election on 14 April should trigger serious reflection on the left about the limits of chavismo without Chávez.**

Maduro won by 1.6% of the vote against right-wing neoliberal opposition candidate Henrique Capriles, with 50.7% compared to his opponent's 49.1%. Pro-chavista apologists such as the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign were saying only days before the election that Maduro had a double digit lead over Capriles. Turnout was still high at 78%. There can be few excuses.

Hugo Chávez defeated Capriles 55%-44% last October and his PSUV had trounced them in 20 of 23 state governor races last December. Maduro would have expected to gain a strong sympathy vote after Chávez's death in March. He was the comandante's anointed successor, served as his vice-president and had effectively been running the government for months. He had the vast weight of the state machinery as well as the PSUV party machine behind him. Yet he scrapped home by the narrowest of margins.

## Nicolás Maduro salutes a portrait of Hugo Chávez

Chavista apologists have long pointed to the popularity of Chávez as proof of his radical credentials. He did win four presidential elections, as well as other votes (losing only one referendum on extending his powers even further). What this vote shows is that the popularity of the "process" is fading electorally, almost to the point when the PSUV is in danger of losing power through the ballot box.

But a far deeper reflection is needed. Chávez's regime was premised on the revenue from an oil rentier economy. He came to power with oil at \$10 a barrel and died with it more than ten times that level. The oil revenues funded the social pro-

grammes, which undoubtedly narrowed income inequalities, but principally provided a social basis of political support for Chávez. But Venezuela still suffered from power cuts, shortages of basic necessities and vast corruption.

The left should not exaggerate Chávez's achievements. Many Latin American states reduced poverty over the last decade. The programmes as well as the nationalised industries created a stratum of boligarchs and buttressed the private sector. The class structure of Venezuela was remoulded under Chávez, but basic class divisions remain in place – a capitalist state served by a bourgeois government.

The civic-military alliance at the heart of Chávez's Bonapartist project remains intact, but is likely to fracture in the absence of its figurehead. Former military officers run 11 of the 20 PSUV-led state governments, and account for a quarter of the cabinet. The defence minister Admiral Molero Belavia claimed during the election that the armed forces should unite behind Maduro. But there is rivalry between Maduro (representing the civic side) and Diosdado Cabello, the head of the National Assembly and a former military colleague of Chávez. The prominence of the military indicates both the Bonapartist essence of chavismo and how far it is from a genuine working-class socialist project.

The political regime of chavismo has eclipsed the independent working class movement, where the unions are largely bound formally and informally to the Bolivarian state and its ruling party. The oil revenues still flow and with them some economic wriggle room for Maduro.

**But the left should cease to be a mouth-piece for the Venezuelan government and champion the struggles of Venezuelan workers.**

## Fast food workers strike against low pay



By Ira Berkovic

**400 fast food workers in New York struck and demonstrated on 4 April to demand a \$15/hour minimum wage.**

The strike involved workers at McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, Domino's Pizza, and other multinational fast food chains.

Naquasia Legrand, a KFC worker, said low pay in the fast food industry forced workers to make impossible choices: "You have to decide whether to feed your family or get a Metrocard so you can go to work. Or you have to choose between paying your rent or feeding your child".

The strike was part of the Fast Food Forward (FFW) campaign, an initiative of the Service Employees International Union and involving various working-class community organisations and other labour-movement bodies. FFW is one of a number of similar

worker-organising campaigns that have emerged recently in America, led and shaped by unions but employing a more creative range of strategies than traditional recruitment campaigns. They particularly target low-paid, hyper-exploitative jobs in the retail and service sector. Fast food workers previously struck in November, following strikes by Walmart employees on "Black Friday", the busiest shopping day in the US calendar.

Jonathan Westin, director of FFW said: "The fastest growing jobs in the United States are also the lowest paid. Fast food workers are paid between \$10,000 and \$18,000 each year, less than half what it costs to support a family in our city ... McDonald's and Burger King are part of a \$200 billion industry.

**"They should pay their hard-working employees enough to cover the necessities and support their families."**

## Egyptian railworkers fight forced conscription

By Ruben Lomas

**Egyptian railway workers forced the state to back down from a plan to conscript 97 striking railway workers into the army.**

The plan was the Egyptian government's latest attempt to break a drivers' strike that began on Sunday 7 April. It is the country's first nationwide railways strike since 1986. Workers are demanding pay increases and more time off. Train driver Ashraf

Momtaz said: "The Morsi administration's targeting of strikers has proven to be much worse and more oppressive than the actions of the Mubarak regime".

**97 strikers were summoned to a Cairo barracks on Monday 8 April and held for nearly 24 hours. Protests, and a letter-writing campaign from labour lawyers, forced the state to rescind its "public mobilisation order".**

**Hundreds of activists took part UK Uncut's "Who Wants To Evict A Millionaire?" protests against the "bedroom tax" on 13 April. The protests were also supported by Disabled People Against The Cuts (DPAC).**

**The London protest saw up to 300 activists block the road outside the north London house of Work and Pensions minister Lord Freud, serving him with an "eviction notice".**

**UK Uncut supporter Sarah Knight, whose mother is losing money because of the bedroom tax, said: "My mum has just found out that she will have to pay the bedroom tax. My family is terrified about what's going to happen. People's hearts are being broken as this government is turning Thatcher's wildest dreams into a nightmarish reality. But this protest is not about Thatcher's death, it's about the ongoing assault on the welfare state."**

# Not the way to tackle sexism in the labour movement

Left

By Cathy Nugent



In an online article ([bit.ly/hsell](http://bit.ly/hsell)) the Socialist Party's Hannah Sell tries to convince activists not to sign the statement initiated by Unison activists Marsha-Jane Thompson and Cath Elliot ("Our movement must be a safe place for women").

"Safe Place for Women" is an unarguable appeal to the left and labour movement to stand in solidarity with women who are victims of male violence, especially when an incident takes place within our own movement.

Sell cannot directly contradict that sentiment so she takes the line "context is everything". She says the statement will be used by the right-wing in the labour movement, and society, to witch hunt the left. It will distract from fighting capitalism and women's oppression.

Readers who are familiar with the Socialist Party (SP) will recognise two of their techniques here.

First, using the line "You can't say that against the left/the SP/the union because the right wing will use it" as a way of shutting down debate.

Second, the "sledgehammer and nut" approach. A tediously long exposition of how capitalism perpetuates women's oppression precedes the "dangerous distraction" argument.

But what of the details of Sell's right-wing backlash?

Sell says the Savile scandal has created a febrile atmosphere which will make an attack on the left more likely. That's possible but, as Sell herself says, far, far better that such scandals are out in the open and discussed.

Second, Unison's right-wing leaders and their friends in the Labour Party will seize upon this statement to attack the left... because that is what they do. But if it wasn't this issue, it would be something else, surely?

Third, the *Daily Mail* etc. will seize on anti-left criticisms because of "a correct fear by sections of the ruling class that, given the profound crisis of capitalism, the socialist movement will be able to become a mass force in the coming years." I hope that is true. But more likely this Marxist "prediction" is randomly inserted here to boost the argument.

The logical conclusion is that the left should *never* attempt

difficult self-criticism for fear of *Daily Mail* hack polemic.

So far so much the usual Socialist Party nonsense. But Sell does not want to say "Shut up women! Stop making a fuss about sexism in the labour movement" so she stumbles through other arguments about "context" — the opinions of Cath Elliot and the exact wording of "Safe Place for Women".

Sell says Cath Elliot cannot be trusted. It was Elliot who moved a motion at Unison women's conference on "no platform" for rape deniers and used her speech to attack the SWP.

There were problems with Elliot's motion — her use of the term "no platform" and its application to "rape deniers". What Elliot had in mind was stopping George Galloway from being invited to speak at Unison events, as a sort of punishment for trivialising rape when defending Julian Assange. It's more a policy of "non-invitation" than "no-platform". That's not wrong in principle, but it depends... yes, on the context.

Was Elliot's motivation right wing? Judging by this blog post — [bit.ly/celliot](http://bit.ly/celliot) — Elliot was angry at the SWP's attempts at the conference to rationalise their abuse of power. She does *not* argue for no-platforming SWP members, which would be right-wing and wrong.

## NO BAN

In any case none of that has any bearing on "Safe Place for Women" — no ban on SWPers is proposed in the text!

Sell then says that the real problem with the statement is she does not agree with the wording: "...in saying '...when women complain of male violence within our movement, our trade unions and political organisations should start from a position of believing women' the statement bends the stick too far, effectively arguing that the workers' movement begins by concluding the man is guilty, regardless of the evidence, or lack of it."

Sell spectacularly, perhaps deliberately, misses the point. "Start from a position of believing women" is not a proposal to drop due process or natural justice. It is a proposal to "correct" how women get chewed up by the process of making a complaint about sexual assault.

In the bourgeois criminal justice victims often have to prove the integrity and veracity of their complaint.

And "objective" evidence is nearly always supplemented

by subjective assessments about a victim's sexual history, use of alcohol, drugs, etc. Though the system has improved such subjective judgements are still used and much more regularly than in other types of crime.

Elliot and Thompson want to stop the left and labour movement from mirroring this sexism in its own investigative processes, as happened in the SWP's "investigation".

Putting "belief of women" at the heart of any investigation does not contradict establishing objective facts. That is a tricky process and requires special skills. There is a lesson to be learnt there, too, from the SWP experience.

The rest of Sell's article is about defending the right of her organisation to investigate accusations of sexual assault. These points are apropos of absolutely nothing.

So what do the Socialist Party want? Do they want the left to *always* desist from public self-criticism? Or do they only want to suppress this statement, because they disagree with it? They can't have it both ways.

**We need to have public political debate about the state of our movement. Women who have been the victims of a range of sexist behaviour and assault need it. And with much more reason, truthfulness and humility than that displayed by Hannah Sell. Shamefully setting yourself against a reasonable attempt to help clean up the left is entirely wrong.**

• Safe Place: [womeninthelabourmovement.wordpress.com](http://womeninthelabourmovement.wordpress.com)

## A footnote

Sell's sledge hammer approach may indicate unstated motivations for the article. Precisely what these are we do not know.

We know that an accusation of domestic violence made against former Socialist Party (SP) member and RMT Assistant General Secretary Steve Hedley was part of the background to "Safe place for women" (along with the SWP's appalling handling of a rape allegation). After Caroline Leneghan made her complaint about Hedley to the RMT he resigned from the SP.

The union has now said it plans to take no further action; Caroline intends to appeal that decision and the case is far from over (see [bit.ly/clene](http://bit.ly/clene) for background).

The SP has backed Hedley and welcomed the union's decision. We also know that SP member Sara Mayo has resigned stating that her complaint of a sexual assault was badly handled by the party ([bit.ly/s-mayo](http://bit.ly/s-mayo)). In response the SP has made public an internal document with details of the case — [bit.ly/s-mayo2](http://bit.ly/s-mayo2)

## Are "Witch is Dead" cries sexist?

Excerpts from a discussion among *Solidarity* readers about using the phrase "The Witch Is Dead" about Thatcher's death.

**Solidarity is quite right to raise the issue of sexist language being used to curse Thatcher. It went on in the 1980s and there seems to have been some of it since her death.**

I do not, however, agree that the promotion of the song "Ding Dong The Witch Is Dead" by anti-Thatcher protesters/celebrators is necessarily or inevitably sexist. The song was certainly not sexist in its original intention (it was written for a scene in the Judy Garland film *The Wizard of Oz* by the leftie songwriter "Yip" Harburg, who also wrote "Brother Can You Spare A Dime") and I do not believe the campaign to get it to No 1 in the charts is motivated by sexism. It strikes me as a minor, but quite legitimate, act of protest and defiance against the Tories' nauseating campaign to construct a consensus of national reverence around Thatcher's death.

Of course, use of the word "witch" can be sexist, but contest is all. In this case, I don't think it is.

JD

**I'll admit to laughing when I first heard "The Witch is Dead". But then a comrade pointed out the language being used to describe her was sexist.**

I felt completely ignorant about the use of language, especially when I chaired our trades council and a number of people were laughing and using the terms "witch" and "bitch".

I saw some woman delegates with looks of despair on their face.

I pointed out the sexist language and asked why we get taken in by shallow campaigns especially when there are a number of better songs — Elvis Costello's "Tramp the dirt down" would have been my choice.

R

**"Ding Dong The Witch Is Dead" is not a sexist song, in the context for which it was written.**

Is it sexist to use it in reference to Thatcher? Probably. But, it is surely a very good thing that a song celebrating her death is at number one during the week of her funeral. In the way in which it was very very good that the Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen" was number one during the Silver Jubilee.

**Anyone notice good witches are always 'pretty' and bad witches ugly horrid single women? Just saying.**

Maybe with exception of Buffy witches, but then Buffy rocks generally.

I agree it is a sexist song. What is the equivalent that would be sung about a man? Not good enough she was an evil right wing woman, no, she has to be caricatured as a witch.

RW

**I must admit to not remembering the Oz film from my childhood, so I have no understanding whatsoever of the significance of the witch, the West, the munchkins, etc.**

But the use of the word "witch" is a term of abuse reserved

only for women, and witches in fiction are invariably evil and wicked women (not just evil or wicked people), and all this has its origins in the persecution of real women in the real world — literally, in fires that blazed across Europe, at one point.

P

**I think pretty much all uses of the word "witch" to describe a woman are sexist unless, like the character in the Wizard of Oz, she actually is one.**

It's true that the Yip Harburg song is not itself sexist but surely its use now around Thatcher's funeral is. I can't really see how you can contextualise that away. There are much better ways to celebrate her demise and remember all the victims of her government's policies.

MT

Thatcherites through and through. Feeling good about making your life a misery

# Now bury Thatcherism

**What we hold against Margaret Thatcher is not that she was “divisive”. We, revolutionary socialists, are “divisive” too — only we want to rally the worse-off to defeat the rich, while Thatcher rallied the rich to defeat the worse-off.**

In a recent opinion poll, a clear majority (60%) thought that the taxpayer should not cover the cost of Thatcher’s funeral, and an equally clear majority, 59% to 18%, thought “Thatcher was the most divisive Prime Minister this country has had that I can remember”.

The thing Thatcher is most remembered for, according to the poll, is “curbing the power of trade unions” and “the miners’ strike”. We do not regret the miners’ strike: we think the miners should have won, and could have won if the TUC and Labour leaders had shown more solidarity.

Cameron and Osborne seem less divisive than Thatcher not because they are less malign, but because our side is not yet fighting back as hard as we did in the Thatcher years. As the thoughtful US billionaire Warren Buffet puts it: “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning”. It is bad, not good, that the class war appears less divisive. It’s because the working class is not yet fighting back strongly enough.

Cameron and Osborne are converting the NHS from a public service into a marketplace softened only by the provision (for now) of money from the government for GPs (or, rather, contractors on behalf of GPs) to buy services. It’s a marketplace where many treatments are now in many areas not available without paying. Thatcher’s government made the start, but a small one by comparison. It cut back the NHS, closed many hospitals, and started to introduce the “internal market” (from June 1990, only a few months before Thatcher resigned in November 1990).

Cameron and Osborne are slashing welfare benefits on a scale never seen before. Over 27 million will be affected by the latest cuts starting this April. As they work through, the average person will lose £467 per year; people in poverty will lose an average of £2,195; disabled people, an average of £4,410 per year — this at a time when company chief executives paid themselves a 16% rise in 2012, to an average of £215,000 across companies large and small.

Thatcher cut welfare benefits, after a whole era in which expanded welfare was seen as a normal component of general economic growth. The sharpest impact was from her abolition of income support for 16 and 17 year olds, in 1988, which pushed a whole swathe of that generation of teenagers into homelessness on the streets.

Cameron and Osborne are cutting housing benefit (through the “bedroom tax”, the “benefit cap”, and otherwise) and council-tax benefit, which will push a whole new swathe of people into homelessness.

Cameron and Osborne as yet feel no need to bring in new laws restricting trade-union action on top of those which Thatcher and Major imposed in 1979-90 and which Blair and Brown kept in force. But they keep threatening that they will, if trade unions resist more.

Already they are cutting away at workers’ rights and union strength by changing the law to make it more difficult to sue over bosses’ breaches of health and safety rules, or over unfair sackings. In the public sector they are making pay more fragmented, more dependent on the individual boss’s favour than on basic union-negotiated scales. They are cutting back the time allowed for union representatives to do their union work, and edging towards outright cancellation of union recognition in some areas.

Today’s Tories are just as much class warriors as Thatcher’s. Only, so far, they face less resistance, and so can appear less “divisive”.

## SAME ERA

**In the 1950s and 60s the Tories said they had a policy of “One Nation”, in which the working class and the worse-off would get improvements at a similar pace to the rich, though of course at a respectful distance behind them.**

They could say that because the reorganisation of world capitalism after 1945, under US domination, had created a framework which allowed for steady growth, with relatively mild capitalist competition, for a sizeable time. They did say that because they reckoned that the concessions granted to the working class in 1945-8, for fear of revolutionary upheavals such as followed World War One, were so deeply-entrenched that it would be risky to revoke them.

Thatcher represented the wealthy classes in an era when the mechanics of world capitalism had changed. The financial architecture set up in 1945 had collapsed. World capitalist competition had sharpened and diversified. There were sharper ups and downs.

We are still in that era. Cameron and Osborne are still Tories of the Thatcher breed. What we need is more “divisiveness” on our side, the side of the working class.

With Solidarity and Workers’ Liberty, we’re in the business of encouraging workers in Britain to divide from British bosses and bankers, and to identify with workers in other countries.

**We want more and rougher class struggle from our side, to counter and defeat the class warfare of the rich. We want it because it is the way toward taking productive wealth out of the hands of the top one per cent and into democratic social control, and creating a new society based on human solidarity and equality.**

## Help us raise £15,000

Thanks to the donations of comrades and supporters, the AWL office will be taking delivery of a new top-of-the-range digital duplicator in the next two weeks. That means we’ll be able to increase production of our workplace bulletins and other leaflets, making sure our members have printed literature as well as online material to read with contacts.

There are other ongoing projects and initiatives for which we need financial support. In the last year, we’ve widened our network of international contacts – we need funds to pay for travel to bring them to the UK and to send AWL comrades to visit them.

Our May Day solidarity greetings appeal is also picking up pace. This week we received messages from Notts Trades Council and Camden 3 branch of the RMT that they’d like to take out a solidarity advert in our May Day issue. Will your union branch do the same? A two column space (78mm x 84 mm, 10-30 words) is £15, and three columns (78mm x 174mm, 50-70 words) is £25. Please do not send us artwork but a copy of your logo or graphic you would like to use (preferably electronically, or camera-ready) and the text of your greetings / message. The deadline is Monday 29 April.

● Taking out a monthly standing order using the form below or at [www.workersliberty.org/resources](http://www.workersliberty.org/resources). Please post completed forms to us at the AWL address below.

● Making a donation by cheque, payable to “AWL”, or donating online at [www.workersliberty.org/donate](http://www.workersliberty.org/donate).

● Organising a fundraising event.

● Taking copies of *Solidarity* to sell.

● Get in touch to discuss joining the AWL. More information: 07796 690874 / [awl@workersliberty.org](mailto:awl@workersliberty.org) / AWL, 20E Tower Workshops, 58 Riley Road, London SE1 3DG.



**Total raised so far: £9,701**

We raised £285 this week in donations with more promised. Thanks to Paul, Stephen, Paulette and Mike.

## Standing order authority

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Signature .....

# Fifteen years of online solidarity

Bruce Robinson reviews *Campaigning Online and Winning: How Labour Start's ActNOW campaigns are making unions stronger* by Eric Lee and Edd Mustill

**Working-class solidarity follows capitalist globalisation to respond to attacks on workers' rights wherever and whenever they occur.**

"The international nature of the global economy is often seen as being bad for workers and of course it often is. But it is also potentially a source of great strength for us. When we enter into a struggle we have allies all over the world", Lee and Mustill comment. As electronic communication has become accessible from the 1990s onwards, trade unionists and their supporters have developed their own tools that make use of the same networks that enable 21st century global capitalism.

LabourStart began as a website providing labour information but has also experimented with the use of more activist technologies. One that has been long lasting and successful — now 15 years old — is ActNOW campaigning, sending email letters in support of trade unionists under attack to pressurise employers and governments. LabourStart has built up a list of over 100,000 people who have taken part and are regularly requested to join new campaigns.

This little book provides examples under six headings — fighting victimisation, from the London Tube to a hotel in Pakistan; fighting to free prisoners such as Kamal Abbas in Egypt and Mansour Osanloo in Iran; supporting strikes of 100,000 public sector workers in Botswana or 60 clothing workers in a small town in Norway; opposing union busting by Fiat, Suzuki and the Canadian government; breaking lockouts in Turkey, New Zealand and the US; and taking on the multinationals such as G4S in Indonesia and BAT in Burma. They range across the world from the UK, US and Europe to Swaziland, El Salvador, Bahrain, Ecuador and the Philippines, with targets ranging from governments and corporations down to a small sub-contractor at the end

of a global supply chain.

An influx of emails can serve not only to bring pressure on their targets — particularly those dependent on a good reputation with their customers — but also to bolster workers' resolve by showing that they are not alone and to make governments and employers realise that their actions are being watched around the world. The campaigns can also lead to street activism such as demonstrations outside the Eritrean and Egyptian embassies in London demanding the release of imprisoned trade unionists.

Not all supporters take part in every campaign. The largest — such as against Fremantle, who tried to get LabourStart closed down, or the Canadian government's attempt to derecognise the postal workers' union — have attracted 12,000 and 14,000 names respectively. But massive numbers are not always necessary for success. Only 750 messages had an impact on a victimisation dispute in a hotel in Pakistan.

Obviously not all campaigns are successful and the only real way to assess their contribution to the outcome of a dispute is through the testimony of those involved whether workers or employers.

## IMPACT

**Their positive impact can be either individual or collective. Said El Hairech, an imprisoned Moroccan seafarers leader wrote after 5,600 supporters emailed successfully demanding his release: "When I was in jail I knew the whole world was behind me."**

"I thought, they cannot resist such a campaign", while a successful action against victimisation in New Zealand gave a general boost to union organisation: "the members... are really energised about unionism after a brief introduction and a big win."

Lee and Mustill emphasise that online campaigning can only be one tool in a dispute and that "it's only the partnerships with unions and the work done offline, on the ground that makes victories possible." They emphasise that participation is not a form of "clicktivism" — self-sufficient online activism: "We do not consider ourselves to be 'online activists'... We are first and foremost trade unionists... Our campaigns, all of them, are designed... to strengthen that movement" and its ability to win offline.

The ActNOW model is based around a centralised control of the campaigns, which ensures that subscribers receive a limited amount of email about genuine disputes. But it is also problematic in two respects. It does not allow for participants to make direct links with the workers involved in disputes as more interactive forms of online involvement through social media do — though this has proved possible by other means. LabourStart has tried to rectify this through the launch of a "safe" alternative to Facebook, Unionbook, but only a very small proportion of its email subscribers have become involved.

More controversially, it allows LabourStart to filter which campaigns get taken up and to impose a rule that only those with the support of an official union organisation will be accepted. This excludes wildcat or rank and file led disputes as well as those where the workers involved are in conflict with their union officialdom or structures.

The book aims to inspire both through accounts of LabourStart's campaigns and the struggles they support and to educate about the potential and limitations of online campaigning.

**It concludes with seven things readers should do, not the least of which is signing up for all the current campaigns at LabourStart's website.**

# Illumin

Robert Ford is a visual artist based in London. He is currently working producing an illustrated edition of Karl Marx's *Capital*. He spoke to Daniel Randall from *Solidarity* about the project.

**Around eighteen months ago, I was attending some *Capital* reading groups, including one run by Workers' Liberty. I was also watching David Harvey's lectures.**

It seemed to me that many people, including many people around the Marxist left, didn't have any engagement with *Capital* or grasp of its key concepts. So I wanted to undertake an original project that would make people more interested in the book and, hopefully, get them to read it in its original form.

I initially planned to mirror Harvey's method of focusing on the key concept in each chapter, and do a single illustration for each one. But each chapter has more than one key concept, so just trying to illustrate one was limiting. The number of illustrations has mushroomed.

The project is called *Captilicus Religicus Magica*; the style I'm going for is a pastiche of medieval illuminated manuscripts. That's obviously intended to be humorous — there's a lot of humour in Marx's writing anyway, and I think a humorous style will help make the project interesting and accessible. There is text within each illustration that emphasises the key concept, and I've set myself the task of writing that text in rhyme. There'll be about 36 illustrations for Volume One of *Capital*.

I'm in touch with David Harvey about the project, and he's very supportive. We've discussed him writing a foreword, and I'm also in touch with various other Marxist academics to discuss their potential involvement. It's been difficult to find a publisher, as there are high upfront costs for a project like this. Verso was initially interested, but decided after internal discussions it wasn't for them.

I'm producing the illustrations in A1 size and framing them as I go. They're pictures in their own right, so it may be the case that as the project develops it turns into something other than a book — perhaps a travelling exhibition of illustrations, for example.

The themes I've chosen to illustrate have developed as I've progressed. The key concepts and chapter headings, such as commodities and surplus value, are covered, but less obvious concepts are dealt with too. The idea isn't to lecture or patronise people but to contextualise some of Marx's key ideas. *Capital* can be difficult to read on one's own; it's better read as part of a group, and I'm hoping the illustrations can provide some of the same context that discussing the book with other people entails.

I worked in advertising for 30 years. It's a horrible industry, capital's champion, but it succeeds in getting people's attention and making them look at things. We can learn from that.

Ultimately I see this project about getting back to *Capital*, and back to Marx. Because of a whole series of historical developments, most especially Stalinism, what's understood as "Marxism" has had a lot of negative baggage piled onto it.

**I see my project as a contribution to the attempt to get rid of some of that baggage and take people back to the real ideas of Marx and Marxism.**

LabourStart's ActNOW campaign was crucial to building solidarity with jailed Bahrainian teacher unionist Jalila al-Salman

# ating Marx

**Robert Ford's *Captilicus Religicus Magica* project is a pastiche of medieval illuminated manuscripts, which aims to literally "illuminate" the key concepts in Marx's seminal work.**

**The artist, who is set to take over curation of Conway Hall's exhibition space, says he wants the project to lead people back to Marx and his writing, and help unburden Marxism from the negative baggage heaped on it by Stalinism.**

**The text accompanying the illuminations is written in rhyme. Two other details are included below.**

**For more information, see the artist's website: [eyeingthebeast.bigcartel.com](http://eyeingthebeast.bigcartel.com)**

## Songs of Liberty & Rebellion



Janine Booth is a member of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport workers union (RMT) Executive and a member of Workers' Liberty. She has written and performed poetry for many years. She wrote this piece in response to the death of Margaret Thatcher.

## Respect for the dead

Today I mourn the passing of those who deserve our tears  
The many many victims of Margaret Thatcher's years

The teenage generation, hopes destroyed without a care  
Like jobless Sean and Raffy\*, who ended lives filled with despair  
Derelict inner cities where hopelessness was rife  
Miners who lost their jobs, their communities and some their life

The millions who rely on a battered welfare state  
The victims of the queerbashers emboldened by Section 28  
The families of the 96, the contempt she showed for fans  
The crew of the General Belgrano, bereaved families in both lands

Part of me's not partying to mark that Thatcher's dead  
But wishing we were toasting the death of Thatcherism instead  
I wish that she had lived to see her side of the class war  
lose  
To see our side victorious, as reds strike out the blues

I wish she'd lived to see our sleeping giant wake  
A mighty army rise up, a better world to make  
Cast off the legal shackles, forsake the ball and chain  
The "socialism" word she thought she'd killed back on our lips again

Labour leaders squandered 13 years to right her wrongs  
And now join in the mourning and the requiem of songs  
Remember you'll get up with fleas if you lie down with curs  
I wish our class was led as loyally as she led hers!

So you won't see me mourning now that Thatcher's dead and gone  
The thing to really celebrate is that our struggle soldiers on  
I'll shed no tears for Maggie, and may even raise a glass  
As a Shrewsbury picket might have said, "Respect for the dead? My arse"

\* Sean Grant and Graeme "Raffy" Rathbone, whose suicide became symbolic of youth unemployment and despair, with "Sean and Raffy RIP" graffiti appearing around the country.

Follow Janine on Twitter: @JanineBooth

# Building a British Syriza?

## Jim Jepps

Jim Jepps is the Camden organiser for the Left Unity initiative launched by Andrew Burgin and Kate Hudson and backed by Ken Loach. Jim is a former member of the SWP and then of the Green Party, which he left recently. He spoke to Martin Thomas of *Solidarity* about the initiative.

**Syriza shows that radical leftist politics don't have to be fringe politics. People will vote for left politics, if they're done in the right way. That means being inclusive, and to some extent being populist.**

Obviously, Rifondazione, Die Linke, Front de Gauche, Syriza all involved having had a mass Communist Party in those countries, and drawing on those traditions, the personnel, and sometimes the infrastructure. We've never had that here, so our route to a broader, pluralist left party has to be different. But I don't think British people are particularly different from German or French people.

**Q: We would welcome a British equivalent of Syriza, though we don't see one emerging any time soon. But anyway, without waiting, we in AWL try build a left organisation that can do the job of DEA or Kokkino in Syriza. That's necessary whatever happens. The leadership of Syriza has been pulled into the centre.**

JJ: Any left regroupment has to be as broad and inclusive as possible. We have to find ways of working together, in particular where we have tactical disagreements. That doesn't mean there shouldn't be red lines. If there was a war like Iraq, for example, it'd be very difficult to see how you'd accommodate people who supported that war.

**Q: We favour an arrangement where we can unite in action where we agree, and debate where we disagree. We advocate local left forums in which the left debates its differences openly and does enough in unity to be a visible force, socialist, aligned to the working class, and not just**

**"against austerity".**

JJ: The left should be a rich place ideologically. It's true that we often dumb ourselves down to lowest-common-denominators.

I favour a looser idea of democracy. A "winner-takes-all" approach, where anyone who disagrees with a decision after it's been taken has to shut up and lump it, isn't helpful.

Most people who are to the left of Labour in this country are not members of organisations. One of the key issues we face is how to empower those people.

The left organisations, the Trotskyist organisations, don't have a monopoly and their models are not the only way the left has to be. In order to have a richer political environment, we have to have spaces for other people to breathe.

In previous unity projects, independent people have felt like they're a stage army for the existing groups.

**Q: But there are limits. If a left movement or party which prides itself on being easy-going gets representatives elected to offices in trade unions or in local government, those representatives can say "this is an easy-going organisation, you're not going to tell me what to do with this office, I'll do it my way"...**

JJ: The Red Green Alliance in Denmark has an interesting model, where they have a very permissive culture at the bottom and a very strict one at the top. All their governmental representatives are expected to vote in line with agreed policy. I'm for slightly greater permissiveness even at the top.

I'd want to see maybe six policies that are absolute bottom lines, where you'd say to an MP "we don't care what you think personally, this is how you vote on this issue", and just be looser on everything else.

The RGA commits its MPs to voting a particular way on everything in its manifesto, which I think risks alienating some people who might be uncomfortable with certain aspects of policy.

**Q: What are your realistic hopes for the new Left Unity initiative?**

JJ: I'm a pessimist at heart, from experience of previous projects in this country. But what I like about Left Unity is that it's said "let's start a discussion". It hasn't launched a new party, it hasn't said "here are our big names, come and be their follower", it's just said that we need a discussion on building a new left-wing organisation in this country.

We've had 8,000 people sign up to be part of this. That shows the potential.

I'm not sure where it'll go. By the end of the year we'll have a much clearer idea.

**Q: The LU project looks like "unity for splitters", in that many of those involved are people who've split from the Green Party, or Workers' Power, or Respect, or the SWP, or whatever, and want something big and quick to replace their old group...**

JJ: We're all splitters on the left! It's true that some people who leave groups are simply people who find it difficult to be in organisations. Some of those people are coming towards Left Unity, and maybe if it's successful then in three years' time they won't be involved any more...

But if that's a characteristic of the left as a whole, we're probably doomed. In general I think we can get on with each other if we develop a better culture, and get rid of that "winner-takes-all" attitude.

I don't think the people who've left the SWP are just looking for an SWP mark 2. There've been floods of new ideas in and around the International Socialist Network.

**Q: Over the last ten years there have been about eight different unity projects which have failed. What's different with this one?**

JJ: Those projects didn't all fail for the same reason. The Socialist Labour Party was very different from the Socialist Alliance, and Respect was a very different kind of organisation again. The left collectively made very different mistakes with each of them.

There's a tendency to blame the SWP, which is understandable, but it lets everyone else off the hook. We could all have done better in the Socialist Alliance. I think the fatal blow was struck when the Socialist Party found a reason to leave, and their absence left no counterbalance to the SWP.

It's too early to say what kind of organisation Left Unity will become. We're hoping it won't look like any of those initiatives. But each of them had successes.

The Convention of the Left was commendable in its modesty, in just setting out to get everyone in a room talking to each other, but if you remain amorphous and ambiguous for too long, there's no reason to continue. You end up being so worried about taking controversial decisions or doing things that not everyone agrees with, you end up doing nothing.

Left Unity has the most to learn from the Convention of the Left in terms of that modesty, but we have to nail things down and move on more quickly.

**Our Left Unity group in Camden is planning to campaign against the "bedroom tax". We'll do a showing of *Spirit of '45*, set up an email list, hold more meetings, continue to talk to each other and learn from each other.**

• Left Unity: <http://leftunity.org>

## IDEAS FOR FREEDOM 2013 Marxist ideas to turn the tide



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Other activities include a walking tour of radical East London history with David Rosenberg (20 June) and a social fundraising event for the "3 Cosas" campaign on Saturday night.

Tickets bought before 20 April are £26 waged, £17 low-waged/students, £6 unwaged/school or college students. Ticket price includes food for the weekend.

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Free creche and crash accommodation.

# Grim realities in Syria

Mark Osborn replies to Pham Binh's polemic against the AWL position on Syria (*Solidarity* 281, 10 April 2013, originally published on northstar.info).

**"My country is being destroyed. The regime is killing us, many of the opposition fighters are becoming criminals and the world is watching it like a film." Ahmad, from Deir ez-Zor (*Economist*, 23 February 2013)**

Pham Binh argues: The AWL misunderstands the nature of the Syrian opposition because, firstly, we ignore the continuing secular, peaceful mass demonstrations and, secondly, that we overestimate the degree of influence Islamists have in the opposition movement. Binh argues that there have been relatively few instances of sectarianism among oppositionists; liberated areas are not Islamist tyrannies; we misunderstand the difference between people who are Muslims and people who are Islamists. He sums up that the "AWL's conclusion that it can support neither side in Syria's civil war proceeds from the assumption that both sides are equally reactionary... that the choice between Assad's tyranny and Islamist tyranny is no choice at all."

Despite the fact that Pham Binh's article is an honest attempt to engage in a debate on an important question, his argument has serious problems in two main respects. First, because he is complacent about Islamism (and ethnic sectarianism) in Syria. Second because he ignores a big part of our case which has nothing to do with Islamists (directly), but which concerns the Marxist attitude to the state and relates directly to what we've said in the past about the use of slogans (for example about the slogan "Troops Out Now" in Ireland and Iraq).

The three key points in the AWL NC resolution quoted by Binh are: given the fragmented and increasingly religiously radical nature of the opposition a victory for the rebels will lead to ethnic cleansing, chaos and warlordism; that if the opposition are able to overrun the Baathist state conditions (both for the welfare of ordinary Syrians and for the possibility of progressive struggle) will be made worse, and so we should avoid slogans which lead to this; as a consequence we would not necessarily denounce a deal between Baathists and oppositionists which we believe might avoid the collapse of Syrian society into chaos. Given this I would not accept Binh's summary of our position.

## STATE

**It might be worth amplifying the point about the state. In the 1980s, for example, we rejected the use of "Troops Out" without a political settlement for the north of Ireland.**

We had come to see the demand as irresponsible, not because we thought the British state had a progressive role, but because if the central part of the apparatus keeping the lid on the conflict abdicated, the way would be clear to a major escalation of inter-communal conflict. Divisions in the working class would deepen, thousands more would die, Ireland would be repartitioned. Since that would be a big step backwards, why would we choose to raise a demand that would lead to it?

Although the British state was brutal in Northern Ireland, its withdrawal without agreement between the two antagonistic communities would make matters worse, not better. In Syria we should understand that although things are very bad (from a humanitarian point of view, and for the possibility of democracy, women's rights, etc.) they could get much, much worse. In a particular Syrian town, at a particular moment, socialists might well favour the victory of the local militia against Assad's army. But "victory for the Syrian opposition" as a general slogan now has a real meaning that would take the struggle for freedom back, not forwards.

To understand why, we need to look at the conditions on the ground. So where are we now?

There are probably 1,000 armed militias operating in Syria today. These militias have no overarching command structure, or anything like one. They are funded by a great many outside groups and governments. Large weapons shipments from Qatar are now going through Turkey and from Saudi via Jordan. The US has a programme to train their own FSA group underway in northern Jordan.

**Mark Osborn argues that sectarian militias, rather than mass democratic protests, are now the key element in the anti-Assad movement.**

The militias might have some real or nominal allegiance to the various outside sponsors, but have wide discretion themselves. Alliances inside the country are continually shifting. They are certainly not led by the latest exterior political front, effectively dominated by the Muslim Brothers, the Syrian National Coalition.

The point here is not that Islamists have control of the opposition movement (although their influence is very worrying, substantial, and increasing), but that no one has control of the movement. There is no oppositional force, good or bad, currently capable of replacing the existing state and keeping the country — more or less — together. In fact Binh doesn't attempt to argue how the current opposition could get from where it is now, to form a democratic state.

The opposition fighters continue to make gains in the north and north east. However the most significant and new fact is the rebel gains made in the south of the country. This, I think, is the beginning of the battle for Damascus. Josh Landis, the US academic, speaking on 7 April 2013 on Al-Jazeera, argues that Damascus will probably be destroyed in the same way Aleppo has been, and as the military is pushed out the Alawites will fall back, in disarray, to their village heartlands on the coast. If the Alawites lose there — which they will — they will not stick around to find out if the rebel militias, which have not been taking prisoners, will be kind to them. Landis says the three million Alawites will run away, to Lebanon (where they may well spark a new civil war). He likens their likely fate to that of the similar number of Christians killed or driven out of Turkey during World War 1.

We might add that other groups — and certainly the Kurds whose freedom is opposed by pretty much every other opposition group — face repression too. It is already happening. There have been battles between PKK Kurdish groups and both Islamists and more secular rebel groups. The most recent fighting has been widespread in Ras al-Ayn on the northern border.

If the struggle develops in this way — and it is not clear what will stop it — Syrian society will collapse. And it will collapse in many different ways — certainly economically and socially. It will probably also be invaded, by Turkey in the north, from Jordan (buffer zones to keep chaos away from these states are already being planned) and possibly by Israel too.

This is what an opposition victory means right now, concretely.

Part of the problem with Binh's analysis is the relationship he sees between the militias and the previously existing mass movement: "The demonstrators grew tired of being cut

down by machine gun fire and took up arms to defend themselves." In fact the militias in Syria today largely were superimposed on the democratic movement rather than an organic product out of it. The armed groups are certainly not controlled by the mass movement — they have their own command structures, funding, programmes.

On 23 November 2011, we wrote in *Solidarity*: "The Syrian demonstrators not only have a right to defend themselves from state violence, they are right to do so. It makes no sense that innocent protesters offer themselves up, week after week, as martyrs to be mown down by the state's thugs." But that was a year and a half ago, when the movement had a different character, and the meaning of "Victory to the opposition" (the article's title) was different. We wrote, "The basic feature of the movement in the country, now, is positive and democratic. It is organised by networks of activists and local co-ordinating committees." But even in 2011 we noted, "The FSA states it is non-sectarian and is simply in favour of freedom. [But] the Free Syrian Army has its own command structure, and the attacks it is launching against regime targets [...] are probably independent of the local committees, although some army deserters have clearly been involved in local self-defence."

And I do not recognise Binh's description of rebel-controlled areas. Happily Binh tells us that the Islamist judicial bodies that have "sprung up" across the country have not acted in a sectarian manner; liberated areas are governed "fairly effectively by a mix of secular and Islamist elements." I would suggest that claims that salafi and jihadi sharia courts are not acting in a sectarian way are — at the mildest — unlikely.

## CHAOS

**There is a substantial amount of chaos already in the country. Four million have no telephones, water, food or fuel. Two million are internally displaced. Thousands of factories, roads, schools, hospitals have been destroyed.**

Many of the middle class professionals have fled the country. The death rate is increasing (the equivalent number of killings in the UK, over the two year period of the uprising would be over 190,000). The working class has, essentially, been destroyed, with regular work only existing in pockets of regime controlled territory, and provided to regime loyalists to maintain that loyalty; these are not good conditions to build a democracy, even assuming that those with power intend that.

For example, a new report — whose authors include the UK's Department for International Development — details conditions in Aleppo, which has been an open battleground since July 2012. The survey is an analysis of 52 neighbourhoods (from 125 in the city).

The report on Aleppo states that 10,800 people have been killed, 4,500 people are missing, 511,900 people are internally displaced, one million people have left. The education system has collapsed; 26 of the 52 areas have not had electricity for six months; only four out of the city's seven hospitals are functioning; 2.2 million people are in danger of not having enough to eat; 240,000 do not have enough access to water.

Factories have been stripped, either by owners, or militias (some of whom died fighting each other over the spoils). There is no work outside the militarised structures. Basic food and fuel are rare or impossibly expensive. Because the UN relief operations work with the government's permission, aid goes to areas under regime control. Opposition areas are often subjected to indiscriminate regime bombing.

The BBC adds to the picture (17 January 2013): "It is widely believed in Aleppo that the bread shortage was caused by the FSA stealing flour to sell elsewhere. An FSA officer confirmed as much... None of the FSA brigades — all accusing each other of looting — trusted anyone else.

"Now the shopkeepers, farmers and small businessmen of the countryside are in charge in large parts of the city.

"Free Aleppo' has eight-hour bread queues, power cuts, children scavenging for rubbish to burn and trees in the parks all cut down for firewood."

*Continued on page 10*

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The BBC also report large numbers of people being “arrested” — in reality abducted for ransom — often dressed up in political language by the militia responsible.

Part of the appeal of some of the harder-line Islamists is that they are seen as more honest. The FSA-affiliated Northern Farouq brigade, recently in serious conflict with Al-Nusra Front, the local al-Qaeda affiliate, apparently traffics cement, fuel and even drugs.

Obviously the situation in the liberated areas has an impact on activists and their organisations. For example, the oppositionist writer Hajj-Saleh, who is in hiding in Damascus, offers a bleak assessment of the local structures (March 2013): “Conditions in the society of the revolution [...] are not] promising. [There are] widespread signs of dissolution, damage to social ties, the spread of violence and use of violence to settle diverse scores or for private profit. The forms of self-organisation do not meet needs in most areas, as the elements of dissolution, fragmentation, and selfishness are more present and influential than those of healing, cooperation, and joint action.”

Now of course the gross, systematic sectarian outrages and war crimes committed by the regime have not been simply mirrored by the opposition. That is true. And Binh assures us there have been no massacres carried out by the opposition. Which is not quite true and not equivalent to saying the opposition is not sectarian. Take a small number of recent examples:

1. HRW reports (23 January 2013): “Armed opposition group destroyed a Shia place of worship in Idlib governorate, and two Christian churches in Latakia governorate were looted.” And, “a dozen extrajudicial and summary executions [were carried out] by opposition forces and [there is] torture and mistreatment in opposition-run detention facilities.” (13 November 2012 and 17 September 2012).

2. CNN interviewed Abu Mariam (15 March 2013), a former political prisoner and now an activist in Aleppo. He was flogged by an Islamist militia for “crimes against Islam” and, later, hospitalised by another armed group when he tried to stop them robbing a neighbourhood shop.

3. A video (see Syria Comment site) shows a victim of a Sharia court in Raqqa. He has been horribly beaten for — essentially — having the wrong girlfriend. The *Washington Times* (4 April 13) reports a ruling from a salafi cleric, Sheikh Yasir al-Ajlawni, that it is legitimate for those fighting for an Islamic state in Syria to rape non-Muslim women.

4. The Syrian Human Rights Observatory reported in March: “For the third day in a row, protests erupted in Mayadeen [rebel-held town in eastern Syria] calling on the Al-Nusra Front to leave the town.” The Islamists had set up a sharia court and religious police force. “The protests are an important indicator that people in eastern Syria — where

people do not have a culture of religious extremism — do not welcome the imposition of religious law,” Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said. (Reported by Middle-East online 13 March 2013).

5. An interesting report recently released is an analysis of the attitudes of Alawites in the Homs area (“The Alawite Dilemma”, Aziz Nakkash, March 13). In April 2011 one young Alawite man said he joined a large demonstration against the regime in the main square. He remembers that on this occasion, the “secret service people were brutal with the demonstrators. And that same night, they started shooting at people”. Soon afterwards, he remembers hearing loud appeals to jihad coming from the minarets of mosques — which to Alawites meant a holy war against them. He says, “Suddenly I became scared and I changed my mind, as I realized that what was happening was no longer a revolution”.

## CHRISTIANS

**6. Of the 80,000 Christians in Homs almost all have left, some apparently after a door-to-door campaign by Islamists.**

7. The UNHCR conclude (November 12) that the “conflict has become overtly sectarian in nature.”

“The Commission has received credible reports of anti-Government armed groups attacking Alawites and other pro-Government minority communities. One interviewee, an FSA fighter in Latakia, detailed how, upon capturing Government forces, the Sunni captives were imprisoned while Alawites were immediately executed. On 30 October, a bomb exploded near an important Shia shrine outside of Damascus, killing and injuring several people. On 6 November, a car bomb exploded in the Alawite neighbourhood of Hai al-Wuroud in the north-west of Damascus, reportedly killing ten people.” The report suggests that communities are re-treating into communal organisations.

This process should be familiar to anyone who has looked — for example — at the break-up of Yugoslavia. In such circumstances the reasonable, secular or cosmopolitan-minded majority are marginalised. The political pace is set by the communalists and bigots, and once begun the mass of people, feeling they have no choice, fall back to their communities for safety. Communalism is strengthened and a poisonous retreat begins strengthening mean, narrow ethnic-sectarian and religious identity at the expense of more rational social relations.

Binh assures us that, on demonstrations, calls for a Caliphate are “not terribly popular,” and Islamist slogans for the weekly Friday protests are regularly defeated by thousands of votes. This is good if true as stated. Our knowledge is limited, and restricted to English language sources. And no one would argue that the opposition is one reactionary mass — far from it. But, again, the problem in Syria is that,

the way the struggle is being played out, the people voting against Islamism are not the people who will decide. The decisions will be made by those that control the guns.

Binh makes a big fuss about the AWL’s supposed confusion between Islam and Islamism. I don’t think we have given any reason to suppose we confuse the two. Our NC motion says we oppose all manifestation of Islamism, not all manifestations of Islam.

Binh says that exclaiming “God is great” in response to fighter planes bombing Aleppo university is simply the equivalent of our “God help us!” watching the planes hit the Twin Towers. That might even be true, but there’s a little polemical sleight-of-hand here, and especially writing “God” in English, because I don’t agree that the militia fighters’ shouts of “Allahu Akbar,” or calls made from Sunni mosques for jihad, are more-or-less meaningless, or are consequence-free (even if some of those chanting don’t understand these calls as being politically loaded). To understand the point, imagine living in a Christian village and hearing the fighters’ calls from the outskirts.

Binh says such shouts are a sign of resistance and defiance. No doubt. But in the name of what, since the resistance is not just negative?

Binh notes that “mosques and Friday prayers have been irreplaceable vehicles for mobilising the masses.” Irreplaceable? Really? And again, these places are used to organise against our enemy — but not necessarily in the way that we would positively choose. Honestly, has the left learnt nothing from Khomeini and Iran? In Iran in 1978 the mosques were important organising centres against the Shah but left their positive and reactionary print on the political shape of the opposition. Khomeini reassured us that he was for women’s rights and democracy, and he lied. Our job is not to take the Islamists’ word for their reasonable intentions but to learn from history, to agitate, and to warn.

So when Binh writes that there are two phases of the Syrian revolution, one where we side with all the opposition to Assad, and a second where the opposition will divide over women, minorities and democracy, he’s wrong in several respects. Firstly, because the battle over democratic rights is going on now — it is something for us to take sides on now, not in the future. Secondly, because he says the division will put us on the same side as the Muslim Brothers (who favour elections) against the more extreme jihadis and salafists. The idea of the Brothers acting as a force for democracy can be dismissed quickly by anyone honestly looking at Hamas’s behaviour in Gaza where they have built a one-party, religious state which is intolerant of women’s rights, all manifestations of criticism and self-organisation, unions, opposition political parties and other religions.

**The situation now in Syria is grim. We can’t escape that reality by imagining conditions and the opposition political forces are better than they really are.**

# North Korea: British left struggles to cope

Eric Lee



**Socialist Worker last week reported on the escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula — but in topsy-turvy world of the fast-decaying SWP, it denounced “imperialist war-mongering against North Korea” which “threatened to bring the region to the brink of nuclear war.”**

Allow me to make one or two small corrections.

First, it is not “the region” alone which faces the risk of nuclear war. North Korea’s Taepodong-2 ballistic missiles have a reported range of 6,000 km. That puts Alaska, the northern bits of Australia, the entire Pacific ocean, all of China, most of Russia and the Indian sub-continent all within range.

Second (and how shall I put this delicately?), comrades, the North Korean regime, peace-loving though I am certain you believe it to be, is not entirely innocent here. Perhaps in some tiny way, it might be responsible for at least some of the tensions.

Of course I don’t expect the SWP to take my word for this.

So let’s call upon Fidel Castro to back me up.

According to the *Morning Star*, the former Cuban dictator urged “North Korea to restrain itself for the good of mankind.” Castro also reportedly said that a war could affect “more than 70 per cent” of the world’s population and said the current flare-up was the “one of the gravest risks of nuclear war,” since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis — a subject on which he is considered something of an authority. (He did allow the Soviet Union to place ballistic missiles with nuclear weapons on Cuban soil.)

## STALINISTS

**The Stalinists at the *Morning Star* may be slightly more clued in than the ex-Trotskyists at *Socialist Worker* (there is something ironic in that) but they’re not entirely living on the same planet as the rest of us either.**

In their one editorial so far on the subject, the only criticism they make of North Korea is that “the Kim dynasty in Pyongyang recently rewrote the Marxist maxim that the working class plays the leading role in the construction of socialism to ascribe this role to the armed forces”.

That’s an odd sentence in so many ways, not least of which is the assumption that the totalitarian rulers of North Korea know or care about who plays “the leading role” in the con-

struction of socialism, a project which they are not remotely interested in. Whatever it is that they are building with the help of hundreds of thousands of slave labourers, it is most certainly not socialism.

It’s not surprising that the *Morning Star* has mixed feelings about North Korea — after all, it inherits the Stalinist legacy of full support for any country, no matter how dictatorial and ruthless, so long as it confronts “imperialism”.

Why Britain’s largest trade union, Unite, continues to bankroll this awful newspaper is beyond belief. But it may perhaps have something to do with the fact that the union’s chief of staff has been a leading figure in the British CP for some time and a decade ago publicly expressed his full support for the North Korean regime, saying “Our Party has already made its basic position of solidarity with Peoples Korea clear.”

*Socialist Worker* and the *Morning Star* are struggling with the Korean crisis, but for socialists it is actually not very complicated.

It could be summed up in just six words — “no to war, no to dictatorship”.

No to war — meaning that North Korea must cease its threats and return to negotiations based on UN resolutions.

**And no to dictatorship — meaning, down with the Kim regime, and for a united, democratic and socialist Korea.**

# 3 Cosas workers: right to leave Unison?

*Solidarity* 281 (10 April 2013) carried an interview with a worker involved in the "3 Cosas" campaign at the University of London, who explained their decision to quit Unison and join the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB). Their decision has caused some debate in the wider labour movement. We print two contributions originally posted on the AWL website.

**While it is perfectly understandable why our colleagues have left Unison, and the responsibility for this lies entirely with the branch and regional leadership of Unison, this is a massive defeat for both the Senate House Unison branch, and for the cleaners.**

The reason that the region went to such lengths in the first place was precisely because they realised that they had lost any influence on the branch.

It was inconceivable that a re-run election could have had any other result than a victory to the cleaners and their supporters within the branch.

Within the IWGB, the cleaners will now have to begin a new struggle for union recognition just to be able to negotiate.

While Balfour Beatty may eventually recognise IWGB for pragmatic reasons, the IWGB will have pretty much negligible influence on the University of London management, will have little chance of recruiting more than a handful of university staff to their union, and will leave the Unison branch in the hands of people who have no interest in standing up for the rights of outsourced cleaning staff.

As a secondary issue, the Unison branch itself will now be significantly weakened.

**Both the outsourced cleaning staff and the in-house employees will**

## Can independent unions like the IWGB help workers organise?

**have far less influence than they used to.**

*Simon D*

**I agree that the responsibility for the situation lies with Senate House branch leadership and unelected officials at the Greater London region office.**

And I agree this decision is a major defeat for Senate House branch and will weaken the branch. However, I do not agree that it is a defeat for the cleaners and other outsourced workers. Nor do I agree that the inevitable result of

another election would have been an electoral victory for the outsourced workers and their candidates. Unison has made clear its determination to not allow the outsourced workers and their allies to take over the branch through democratic means, and I strongly believe they would have used other methods to prevent this happening in an additional election.

With all due respect to our comrades who are directly employed by the university, the outsourced

workers have only ever had the support of a handful of directly-employed staff (likely the same handful that will join the IWGB). Furthermore the workers have never really had the support of their branch leadership. Despite this they won a London Living Wage campaign, their employer offered a voluntary recognition agreement, they won £6,000 in overdue wages through unofficial action, and the "3 Cosas" campaign they run has received support from student unions, politicians, and trade unionists throughout the country as well as substantial media coverage. Imagine what they can achieve with a union that supports them.

In terms of the campaign being delayed, ironically this is one of the many reasons the workers — in a democratic assembly - decided to leave Unison. Three more months invested in fighting Unison's dictatorial bureaucracy is

three months' delay for the campaign. Alternatively, switching over to IWGB (nearly 10% of Senate House branch has already signed membership forms this week) allows the workers to focus on their campaign. Just a few days ago they held a protest which had a huge turnout (estimated at 80 people), decent media coverage, and a strong showing of support from their new union.

I believe Balfour Beatty will recognise IWGB and the workers will win their campaign. The strength of the Senate House branch was due to tireless commitment, dedication, and courage of the outsourced workers. These same workers will bring these same attributes to the IWGB.

**And instead of Unison disowning their protests or negotiating their terms and conditions behind their backs, their new union will support them and their initiatives.**

*Jason Moyer-Lee*

## McCluskey wins Unite election

By Darren Bedford

**Len McCluskey was re-elected at General Secretary of Unite, with a 64% share of the vote.**

McCluskey won 144,570 to rival Jerry Hicks's 79,819. The turnout was 15.2%, lower than the union's last

GS election (where it was 15.8%). In that election, the opposition vote was split three ways between Hicks and two right-wing challengers to McCluskey (Les Bayliss and Gail Cartmail). Hicks's vote in that election was 52,000, while McCluskey's winning score

was 101,000.

Workers' Liberty members in Unite are involved in the United Left network, and backed McCluskey as UL's agreed candidate and because we did not feel Hicks's candidacy offered any credible alternative to the McCluskey leadership.

**Following the election the task is to build rank-and-file strength in workplaces and branches and make sure McCluskey delivers on his promises to back industrial action and to deliver a more combative political strategy inside the Labour Party.**

London Met's ongoing attempt to undermine union organisation in the workplace.

**Supporters will lobby university management on 17 April at 1pm. For more info see [stophthewitchhunt.wordpress.com](http://stophthewitchhunt.wordpress.com)**

**Fringe meeting at Unison Health conference, Glasgow — Monday 22 April, 5.30pm at the Campanile Hotel (opposite conference venue)**

**Speakers include Anita Downs, nurse at Lewisham Hospital  
Organised by the *Healthworker* bulletin**

### More industrial news online

- **Post Office strikes** — [bit.ly/XCfBp3](http://bit.ly/XCfBp3)
- **BBC strikes** — [bit.ly/Zstvl1](http://bit.ly/Zstvl1)

### Drop the charges against Max and Steve!

By Ollie Moore

**A recent campaign forced bosses at London Met University to rescind the suspensions of three workers, Jawad Botmeh, Steve Jefferys, and Max Watson.**

But although all three

are now back at work, Steve and Max are still facing "serious misconduct" charges for their role in appointing Jawad to his job in 2007.

The campaign believes Steve and Max have no case to answer, and are being victimised as part of

## Justice for the 33!

**Workers and supporters demonstrated outside Transport for London's headquarters on Monday 15 April to demand jobs for 33 sacked agency workers.**

**The workers, some of whom had been working for London Underground for five years, lost their jobs when their employer (railway industry agency Trainpeople) did not have its contract renewed.**

**Their union, RMT, has been conducting a campaign involving demonstrations and petitioning to demand that these workers are given jobs.**

# Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

## Hong Kong dockers strike

By Ira Berkovic

A strike of 500 dock workers in Hong Kong has entered its third week. The workers are demanding a pay rise of between 17 and 24%, with the bosses' offer currently at 7%.

The strikers also want their union, the Hong Kong Dockworkers Union, to be recognised. In the latest round of negotiations, bosses at the Everbest Port Services and Global Stevedoring Service spoke only

to the official Federation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions, both of which have links to the state-run labour fronts in mainland China and whose members are not involved in the current strike. The dockworkers' organisation is linked to the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU). As *Solidarity* went to press, dockers and their supporters were holding a sit-down protest outside the latest ne-

gotiations.

The strike is causing daily losses of \$500,000, as well as 60-hour delays to ships. 120,000 containers are currently sitting untouched in the terminal. Gerry Yim, a managing director at Hong Kong International Terminals, said the company had "lost [its] reputation in the international shipping business" because of the strike. Local supporters provide food for the strikers and have so far raised more than \$1 million for the

strike fund.

The Hong Kong International Terminals are owned by Li Ka-shing, a billionaire who controls more than 70% of Hong Kong's port container traffic. According to *Forbes* he is the eighth richest man in the world.

**Workers face 12-hour shifts (sometimes with no toilet breaks) and wages that have been frozen for fifteen years in one of the world's most expensive cities.**

## Thatcher destroyed lives

Workers' Liberty activists Karen Waddington and Jean Lane appeared on the BBC's *Big Question* debate programme on Sunday 14 April, discussing Thatcher's death. Karen and Jean were involved in Women Against Pit Closures and other class-struggle activity during Thatcher's government. The poet Benjamin Zephaniah also appeared on the show.

**Nothing changed for me the day Thatcher died. My local authority is still suffering from cuts, and people in my village are still suffering from the devastation caused by Thatcher's pit closures.**

Cameron is still carrying on her policies. Before 2010, my village had funds available for repairs and improvements. When Cameron was elected, that money was cut.

*Karen Waddington*

**I think the celebrations we've seen over the past week have been quite muted.**

If she'd died a few years ago, closer to the events of the miners' strike, we'd have seen a lot more. When you look at what she did to working-class people, to trade unions, to women — she destroyed the lives of working-class people. I haven't been out dancing in the street but I understand why people would.

Thatcher has died, but Thatcherism is still with us. When anyone dies, their immediate family is bound to feel sadness and

in a sense you can feel compassion. But Thatcher was a public figure whose decision affected millions of working-class people, and whose policies are still causing suffering today. People were celebrating the death of Thatcher because they saw it as one step along the way to getting rid of a system that destroy people's lives, that turns young people's lives to desolation. That's what she did, and that's what the policies are still doing.

*Jean Lane*

**There's an element of hypocrisy here. Our news cameras go to other countries and film people celebrating the deaths of their leaders, and it's just seen as a spectacle.**

People say "Thatcher's dead, and we should respect her". But she didn't respect us when we were dying.

I couldn't walk the streets of London or Birmingham when Thatcher was around. Her "sus laws", a law of suspicion, were used to stop black people. I remember being stopped four times in one night.

When people died at Hillsborough, Thatcher knew the police were corrupt and lying, and she colluded in the cover-up.

Her biggest legacy, as stated by her supporters, was privatisation. If we really want to honour her, why don't we privatise her funeral?

*Benjamin Zephaniah*

**DEFEND LONDON'S NHS**

unite the UNION  
GMB GMB@WORK  
NHS Keep our NHS public

**SAVE OUR HOSPITALS  
NO TO PRIVATISATION  
DEMONSTRATION**

**SATURDAY 18 MAY**

Assemble 12 noon  
Jubilee Gardens, Waterloo (Belvedere Rd, SE1)  
March to DoH and Parliament

**SAVE OUR HOSPITALS**

EALING  
CENTRAL MIDDLESEX  
CHARING CROSS  
HAMMERSMITH

**SAVE OUR HOSPITALS**

HAMMERSMITH, CHARING CROSS  
CENTRAL MIDDLESEX & EALING  
www.saveourhospitals.net  
campaign@saveourhospitals.net

**Save A&E services at Ealing, Central Middlesex, Hammersmith, and Charing Cross Hospitals**

**March/rally on 27 April. Meet Southall Park (11.30am) or Acton Park (12.30pm). Rally at Ealing Common (2pm)**

## A police state?

John Stalker, former Deputy Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, wrote in the *Mirror* of 14 April that "Britain has never been closer to becoming a police state than when Margaret Thatcher was in charge".

Stalker writes: "She turned the police into a paramilitary force and put us on to a war footing..."

"That was never more clear than during the miners' strike in 1984 when I believe Margaret Thatcher took Britain to the brink of becoming a police state.

"She decided that 'her'

police force was going to keep the miners and pickets under control. It was all about showing who was boss...

"One official guideline said it was 'perfectly in order' for miners in Kent to be prevented from travelling to Yorkshire if they were likely to cause disorder — a 300-mile exclusion zone.

**"This was a militaristic operation wrapped up in jargon to make it look like policing... To Margaret Thatcher the miners' strike was a war".**

• bit.ly/polstate