

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



No 293 7 August 2013 30p/80p

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For a workers' government

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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!

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● Printed by Trinity Mirror

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Climate activists fight fracking

By Clarke Benitez

Energy company Caudrilla has begun test drilling in Balcombe, West Sussex, in a possible precursor to "fracking" — drilling shale rock to extract gas for energy generation.

Local residents say they are "overwhelmingly against" the process and want their village to remain "frack free". Climate activists have been protesting at the drilling site since the beginning of August, dis-

rupting Caudrilla's tests.

Fracking, which is now widely used in America, carries significant environmental risks. Potentially carcinogenic chemicals can

escape from fracking sites and contaminate groundwater. Fracking has also been linked to increases in tremors and earthquakes.

From 16 August, a protest camp due to take place near West Burton gas power station in Retford, north Nottinghamshire, will also relocate to Balcombe. As part of the "No Dash For Gas" movement, campers will demand transitions away from fossil fuel-based energy generation rather than a rush to replace coal-fired power stations with gas-powered

equivalents.

Workshops at the "Reclaim the Power" camp will include a discussion on the role of energy workers and unions in struggles for transitions, with speakers from transport union TSSA, the TUC, and activists involved in the Workers' Climate Action network, a direct-action solidarity network that formed amongst climate and labour movement activists and was active between 2006 and 2010.

For more information, see nodashforgas.org.uk

Anti-fascists mobilise in East London

By Darren Bedford

70 activists attended a meeting in Bethnal Green called by the Anti-Fascist Network to discuss mobilising against a planned EDL action in Tower Hamlets on 7 September.

Speakers from London Anti-Fascists, South London Anti-Fascists, and Brighton Anti-Fascists (who set up the successful "Stop the March for England" coalition to stop an annual

far-right provocation in their town) set out working-class, direct action strategies for fighting the EDL, and the meeting discussed a range of possible approaches for the day.

The current call-out is for 7 September is for 11am at Altab Ali Park on Whitechapel Road, but as more details of the EDL's plans emerge, anti-fascist plans may alter to disrupt and counter them more effectively.

Zimbabwe poll rigged?

By Andy Forse

Robert Mugabe has claimed a landslide victory in elections held in Zimbabwe on 31 July for the presidency and national assembly.

Yet Human Rights Watch reports that many voters were turned away and many duplicates were on the voter roll. A mole inside Mugabe's Zanu-PF correctly predicted the alleged assassination of one MP and claimed that "disappearing ink" pens had been supplied to polling stations.

In a poll last year 65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "fear of violence and intimidation make people vote for parties or candidates other than the ones they prefer".

Yet monitors from the African Union have given the nod of approval to these elections.

Despite claiming to be a champion against colonialism, Mugabe has pursued a neo-liberal agenda at the behest of the IMF and

World Bank.

Mugabe's main opponent, Morgan Tsvangirai, trapped as nominal prime minister in an outgoing government dominated by Mugabe, and ex-general secretary of Zimbabwe's Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), has called the elections "a huge farce".

Trade unions in Zimbabwe face continued repression. The ZCTU supports Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change party (MDC), but has also criticised the MDC for acting against the interests of workers.

Workers should continue to organise for a genuine socialist alternative that expels market ideology and uses the mineral wealth of the country for the common good.

Here in Britain we should offer support and solidarity so that a strong, unrepressed trade union movement can emerge from the political ruins of Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

Tunisian unions fight Islamist violence

By Dan Katz

The 600,000-strong Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) organised general strike on Friday 26 July in response to the murder of a secular politician, Mohamed Brahmi, a leader of the Popular Movement.

The strike brought Tunis, the capital, to a standstill, as flights were cancelled, trains stopped running and most shops were shut.

The following day police fired teargas on thousands of demonstrators protesting outside the parliament.

Brahmi's assassination is the second murder of an anti-Islamist MP this year. In February Chokri Belaid was killed. The government claims both men were shot with the same weapon, blaming salafist militants for the murders.

However Chhiba Brahmi, Mohamed Brahmi's sister, accused the ruling Islamist Ennahda party of the murder: "It was [Ennahda]

claims were widespread after Belaid's murder.

Following the killing there were immediate large demonstrations. In Sidi Bouzid, Brahmi's hometown and the place the Arab Spring began in January 2011, rioters fought police, blockaded public buildings and attacked the Ennahda office. The opposition has called for civil disobedience and for occupations of government offices.

Hussein Abbassi, head of the UGTT, stated: "We consider this government incapable of continuing its work." The UGTT called for Ennahda to be replaced by a "technocratic government," demanding that Ennahda resigns within one week or the union will be "forced to consider" other options. The Education minister Salem Labyedh resigned.

Over the weekend of 3-4 August, anti-government protesters sat-in in a central square, while tens of thousands of Ennahda supporters rallied to back their government.

Protesters hold a 'sit-in' of Mohammed Brahmi

Victory at Lewisham Hospital!

By a Lewisham nurse

On 31 July, a High Court judge ruled that health minister Jeremy Hunt had acted unlawfully in ordering the closure of Lewisham Hospital's A&E and maternity unit. The ruling slammed the brakes on the closures. We won!

The Save Lewisham Hospital campaign warned us in advance the announcement would be at 11:30am; a tweet went out at 11:37, and by midday everyone in the hospital that I could find already knew the result. Lots of friends and family texted me to congratulate me, and throughout, hospital staff have been commenting in wonder at how the "little people" have won.

Everyone remarks about how proud they are of Lewisham. Funnily, people

seem a little nervous of taking the credit.

It was the campaign that won, it was the people of Lewisham. It was all of us. We did it, us, us! The tens of thousands of people on our historic demonstrations did it. We didn't need anyone else coming in to do this for us — we campaigned, and fund-raised, and refused to rest and accept Hunt's decision.

We would never have been in a position to take this case in the first place if it were not for the financial and campaigning support of thousands of people.

This is a significant victory; the reverberations are being felt up and down the country, including in the corridors of power. But the fight is far from over.

We know already the government is planning to appeal the High Court decision. NHS England had Lewisham marked as one of nine A&Es in London that should close. The fight is still on, and the campaign is already planning a demonstration in Lewisham in September, as well as having a presence at both Labour and Conservative party conferences. It is right to do so.

Time and time again, the local community will show that they are determined to

keep our hospital. This public support heartens us here in the hospital. Even though the fight isn't over, the High Court victory shows us that we can force the government back.

These last few days, we've been smiling at each other in the corridors, and patients have been telling us how pleased they are about our victory. But we know the fight is still on.

Tim Higginson [Chief Executive of the hospital] has warned us that even if the judgement stands and the appeal fails there will be changes at Lewisham. The threat from government has receded by a few months' distance at least, but we must be wary of our own management too, and note carefully what happens.

We know that things can be changed, that we have some power now. But we, as workers in the hospital, have a special, unique power beyond the general potential power of the community campaign. We know how to run this hospital, because we do run this hospital. We are the people who make it function, day in, day out.

If cuts are to be beaten back for good, we need to learn our unique power as workers to change and take

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control of our workplace. We need to learn together, we need to plan.

We have organisations to help us do this. Used properly they can help us fight, not just on the grand level of fighting cuts and closures but on a daily level of helping resist and reverse little injustices in the workplace.

These are our unions, our staffside. Unite is currently leading the way in actively opposing cuts and supporting the campaign, but all the unions need to work together, so we as a group of staff can stand together and

protect ourselves and the services we provide.

If we can learn to communicate and work together for ourselves, just as we work together every day to provide our services, then we can do even more. Because we cannot be satisfied, surely, with saving the status quo.

We need to improve it. We should all be able to be truly proud of the services we provide — top-quality, free, public healthcare. Hunt's legal blunder was part of the Con-Dem project to reform the NHS, and public services in general,

in the interests of profit. We have set that project back with our win in the High Court.

But to derail it entirely, we must counter it with our own project to remake society in the interests of human need. And to do that, our unions must become organisations that can fight for a government that will serve workers' interests as much as this government serves the interests of the rich.

This week's win should galvanise us in that fight.

• savelewishamhospital.com

The next battles

The Judicial Review stops Hunt's closure plan, but means no extra money for the PFI-caused deficit in the South London NHS Trust that the plan was meant to cover.

Trust bosses will already be working on other plans for cuts. We must demand that the PFI debt is abolished.

The Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust went into administration on 16 April after a report concluded it was not "clinically or financially sustainable", following critical failings at Stafford Hospital. But on 20 April, 50,000 people marched against threatened cuts and closures at the hospital. They did not want to lose the buildings and service provision there.

On 31 July the adminis-

trator recommended a series of cuts very similar to those at Lewisham and these will now be put to a public consultation to run over a very short timetable (and in the middle of the summer). Cuts include maternity, emergency operations and critical care. supportstaffordhospital.co.uk

Campaigners at Trafford General Hospital are fighting plans to downgrade their A&E to an urgent care centre and then in five years' time to a minor illness and injury centre. The change would also see critical care, emergency surgery and children's services being cut.

These plans have nothing to do with improving services, centralising specialist services, or any other often-heard "reason" for A&E closure. Central

Manchester NHS Trust says it needs to cut £19m a year from the budget. Campaigners are considering whether to apply for a Judicial Review. Let's hope they have been encouraged by Lewisham. savetraffordgeneral.com

Barts Health, which runs six London hospitals plans to make £77.5 million of savings, including almost £30 million in emergency care and surgery. Problems have been exacerbated by the shape of the "Reformed NHS", in particular NHS England and clinical commissioning groups failing to pay their bills on time.

What is likely to be cut? Services to some of the most vulnerable people. Mental health, care of people with learning disabilities.

Win at the Whittington

By a DWHC activist

The Whittington Hospital in Archway, north London, has been under threat of an enormous sell-off of around half of its buildings and a resulting heavy reduction in patient provision.

Since January, campaigners have been intervening and agitating to stop the plans.

Defend Whittington Hospital Coalition (DWHC) activists trawled through papers at hospital Board meetings in order to find out plans: even MPs from the boroughs affected were unaware (members of the Board were even dragged into the House of Commons by angry local MPs).

After months of campaigning, the following plans have been dropped:

- cap hospital births at 4,000. The maternity unit that was previously facing

cuts will be expanded with a £10 million investment

- plans to cut 570 jobs
- plans to cut sixty hospital beds
- plans to sell the Jenner Building and the Whittington Education Centre
- plans to reduce nurse-patient ratios.

However, the DWHC isn't declaring a full victory. There are still problems with the new proposals. Job numbers haven't been quantified, just the promise of "minimum redundancies", meaning there could still be job cuts. Voluntary redundancies are already happening.

The new plans also include the aim to significantly increase early discharges. This puts the responsibility at the feet of the social care services of local councils, who simply do not have enough staff to cope.

The plans are also unclear about how many beds there will be. It is unclear what will happen to agency and temporary staff, whose pay makes up 10% of the hospital's budget.

DWHC activists have been heroic in their dogged determination to confront senior members of the Hospital Board, in rifling through endless confusing documents and proposals, and in agitating on a number of different levels in order to achieve these gains.

Get involved

- Next DWHC planning meeting — 2 September, 7pm, Archway Methodist Church, Archway Close, London N19 3TD.
- Public meeting, 19 September, 7pm, Archway Methodist Church
- More info: dwhc.org.uk

Much more threat than opportunity

By Dale Street

On 24 July Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey told an emergency meeting of all members of the union's Regional Political Committees and the union's National Executive Committee that Ed Miliband's new proposals for Labour Party structure are "not a threat but an opportunity."

"Ed Miliband has made some bold and far-reaching proposals for recasting the trade union relationship with the Labour Party. Some pundits were expecting me to reject them outright. When Ed made his speech, I saw it as an opportunity not as a threat".

Miliband's main idea (9 July) was that trade unionists should be required to "opt in" individually to the political levy paid to Labour, rather than paying so long as they do not "opt out".

This will lead to:

- A big fall in payments (maybe balanced by union leaders making more donations to Labour out of their non-levy funds)
- Inevitable pressure to cut drastically, or even abolish, collective trade-union input to Labour Party conference and Labour Party committees
- Given the current condition of CLPs, a further elevation of the Labour leadership out of democratic control.

"The details have yet to become clear", said McCluskey,

Speeding the campaign

A campaign to defend the Labour-union link was initiated by some activists at the Tolpuddle Festival in late July, and discussions are in progress about a broader organising committee for it.

Union branches, Labour Party bodies, and individual activists can add their support to the campaign's statement at defendthelink.wordpress.com. The statement has already been endorsed by the Labour Representation Committee and the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy.

It's a slow start, partly because Ed Miliband chose a time for his announcement when little more than the July-August holiday period stood between it and Labour Party conference starting 22 September. But we have to move quickly.

Miliband's plan is for a "consultation document" written by Ray Collins to be put to the September conference. Possibly, probably, Collins will aim to bounce it through in the same way "Refounding Labour" was in 2011 — a long document voted as take-it-or-leave-it after delegates had had only a few days or hours to read it, and with no speeches against.

Final proposals will be put to a special Labour conference around March 2014.

Best reports are that the unions are divided, with Unite, Community, and Usdaw broadly favouring Miliband's proposals, and all the other unions opposing, but not yet campaigning against, them.

Exactly what the Unite leaders understand they are welcoming when they welcome Miliband's plans is not clear, and may be quite different from what Miliband's office thinks the plans are. There are discussions in Unite about schemes which could help what the Unite leaders see as good — getting more individual trade unionists active in the Labour Party — without hurting the collective trade-union voice in Labour.

Unite's Executive Committee meets to discuss the issues early in September.

Every socialist can contribute by canvassing individuals; promoting model motions; inviting speakers; circulating campaign materials; and organising local campaign meetings and networks.

Within the broader campaign to defend the link, socialists will argue for union democracy and for unions to use the link to promote working-class policies.

- More: www.clpd.org.uk

"but they offer the prospect of tens of thousands of Unite members playing a more active role within the Labour Party."

Members of affiliated unions can already join the Labour Party cheaply. Unite levy-payers can join for £19.50 a year, rather than the standard £45.

Unite leaders have been campaigning to recruit them to Labour, but with little success, signing up only a fraction of their modest target of 5000 new Labour Party members (0.35% of the union's membership).

That is not because workers lack the chance to "opt in". It is because the Unite union machine is not good at campaigning among its members; because the Labour leaders' current message is unattractive; and because Unite cannot show its members a strong union drive to change Labour policies which they could join by joining the Labour Party. Those things need to be changed — not the opting-out rule.

Miliband offered those who "opt in" no individual rights or powers in the Labour Party beyond those which levy-payers already have (the chance to vote once every several years in Labour leadership contests). Making the levy-payers opt in, rather than giving them the option to opt out, will not make them more active. It will not increase the numbers who opt to pay more and do more by becoming individual members.

Falkirk West was the exception among the generally poor results of Unite's drive to get its union members to join Labour. There, Unite activists in a big local factory convinced a hundred-plus fellow trade unionists to join the local Labour Party.

The result? A witch-hunt was launched against the union. The leading union activist involved, and the constituency Labour Party (CLP), were both suspended.

That will not encourage others.

DISCOURAGING ACTIVISM

Miliband's other 9 July proposals cut against trade unionists becoming more active in the Labour Party.

"Standard constituency agreements with each trade union so that nobody can allege that individuals are being put under pressure at local level"? But if Labour councillors and MPs can evade all pressure from the rank and file — i.e. pay no attention to rank and file views and decisions — that discourages people from joining.

Labour candidates — initially for London mayor — to be selected in US-style primaries? That would mean that if tens of thousands of Unite members do become more active in the Labour Party, they will find that in selection contests their votes will be dwarfed by those of people who are not even party members and who have paid no or only a minimal subscription.

McCluskey said: "The offer [from Labour to the trade unionists it wants to "opt in"] has to be an attractive one. Above all, that means a Labour Party that (is) not a party that is a pinkish shadow of the present coalition that gives the City a veto over economic decisions and embraces the austerity agenda. I believe that Labour under Ed Miliband can be that party — a party that our members want to support because it feels like their party."

Labour's right wing has long wanted and worked to cut the potential influence of the affiliated unions in the Labour Party, so as to make it easier for a future Labour government to continue with austerity.

McCluskey argues that a cut in the potential influence of the affiliated unions would result in a future Labour government being more likely to... serve workers' interests.

Imagine an employer who announces:

"I've read about the scandal in our Falkirk factory in that well known organ of journalistic honesty, the Daily Mail, and have decided to re-cast my company's relations with the trade union.

"Henceforth, there will be a cut in the number of recognised reps, a cut in their facility time, and every member of our scattered workforce will automatically lapse from the union from next month unless she or he signs a form opting in to it.

"We will make sure union members can apply no pressure to union reps. Passing members of the public will be given

the same right to vote on pay offers as union members."

Imagine a union rep who then responds:

"Some pundits were expecting me to reject this proposal outright. But I see it as an opportunity, not a threat.

"Could I continue to go before the media and pretend to speak on behalf of the entire workforce? No, half of them are not even in the union. It's indefensible, and I don't want to defend it.

"But the offer has to be an attractive one. The employer will continue to attract staff only if he offers the terms and conditions the union wants. And I believe Mr. Grindgrad can be that employer."

Exaggeration apart, that pretty much sums up the logic of the position taken by McCluskey.

Miliband's proposals point to a reduction in trade union influence in the Labour Party. They are the latest step in a consistent drive stretching over three decades. And that is why the proposals have been greeted with enthusiasm by the anti-union Blairites.

McCluskey: "The relationship between the unions and Labour has not always worked for working people. Too often in the past the party has favoured establishment interests over improving the lives of ordinary people."

Until Neil Kinnock started the counter-reforms in the mid-1980s affiliated unions had 90% of the votes at Labour Party conference and a majority on Labour's National Executive Committee.

Often the General Management Committees of local Labour Parties were dominated by delegates from affiliated trade union branches.

Yet, as McCluskey indicates, the union leaders backed right-wingers such as MacDonald and Henderson in the 1920s, and in the 1950s union barons such as Lawther, Deakin and Williamson used the block vote to crush left-wing opposition based in the local Labour Parties.

As the author of a Fabian pamphlet on the union-labour link published in 2005 put it:

"Unions... protected the party against extremism, the political obsessions of the 'chattering classes' and a focus on cultural politics."

The real problem lay in the lack of democracy within the affiliated trade unions, and their domination by privileged officials whose vision never extended beyond getting a slightly better compromise deal with "establishment interests". Lack of rank-and-file control over the union leaders allowed them to serve the Labour Party leadership rather than in the interests of their own members.

The answer is not to cut union voting rights in the party, but to increase membership involvement and accountability within the trade unions.

To reduce the role which unions play in the Labour Party, and maybe seal off that role from rank-and-file influence even more, by making the main relationship between the unions and the Labour Party lump-sum donations from political funds, with their terms negotiated between closed doors between union and Labour leaders, would take us backwards.

McCluskey again: "The experience of the last generation on this issue [of party reform] was: the party leader says something, the unions reject it and have no positive proposals of our own, the first plan goes through anyway and we look like not just losers, but conservative losers."

All six-hundred-plus local Labour Parties and all affiliated unions used to be entitled to submit motions to party conferences. But now a maximum of just four "contemporary" motions from local Labour Parties and four from affiliated unions can be debated at party conferences.

Labour Party leaders have always been quietly dismissive of defeats at party conferences. But under Blair this escalated into brazen contempt for conference decisions.

Trade unions used to control 90% of the votes at party conferences. Successive cuts have seen that fall to 49%. Unions used to have a majority of seats on the party's National Executive Committee. Now they have 12 out of 32. On the National Policy Forum, an invention of the Blair years, trade unions have just 30 out of 186 seats.

And real decision-making powers about party policy have been moved away from conference, the National Executive Committee, or the National Policy Forum, to a Labour Party

Miliband's proposals threaten collective union representation in the Labour Party

leadership sealed off from rank-and-file pressure.

Those were the "plans" which "went through". The unions sometimes complained about the plans at first, but then voted them through because they thought it "divisive" or "helping the Tories" not to.

Union leaders deferred to the Labour parliamentary leaders again and again because they aspired to no more than getting the Tories out (before 1997) and keeping them out (after 1997).

After the Labour Party swung to the left in the early 1980s, 17 trade union leaders in the so-called St Ermin's Group – including the general secretaries of the engineering, rail, electricians', postal workers', steelworkers' and shopworkers' trade unions – took the initiative to win control of the National Executive Committee and reverse the swing to the left.

The main tool they used was the trade union block vote.

At the 1993 Labour Party conference – where unions still had 90% of the votes – John Smith was able to win sufficient trade union support to secure a reduction in the union block vote from 90% to 70%, and the introduction of one member, one vote in leadership elections and parliamentary selections.

Ironically, in the light of more recent developments, the Labour Party leadership sold these cuts in union influence to the unions by introducing the "levy plus" scheme – members of affiliated unions could join the Labour Party for just £3 a year.

BLAIR AND AFTER

After Blair took over as party leader following Smith's death in 1994, the pace accelerated. The trade union leaderships acquiesced.

In 2011 TULO (the unions affiliated to the Labour Party) produced "positive proposals" (though small ones) on Labour Party democracy, in response to the Labour leadership's "Refounding Labour" consultation. The Labour leadership ignored the union proposals, and bounced an undemocratic package through Labour conference 2011. Again, the unions acquiesced.

The answer here cannot be to move from complaining, then acquiescing, to... acquiescing straight away.

McCluskey: *"Strains in the Labour-union link have been fuelled by the failures and disappointments of Labour in office. The block vote didn't stop a Labour government invading Iraq. Affiliation didn't keep Labour out of the clutches of the banks and the City. Our special relationship didn't get the union laws repealed."*

This is rather like arguing that because mass demonstrations of a million or more did not prevent the invasion of Iraq, small demonstrations are better.

Although denunciation of the failure of New Labour to repeal the Tories' anti-union laws has now become a stock-in-trade of union leaders' platform speeches, the union leaders themselves failed to campaign for repeal when New Labour was in office.

In the Warwick Agreement of 2004 – the "deal" the union leaders struck with Labour for the 2005 general election – repeal of the anti-union laws got no mention.

Union proposals for a Warwick Agreement Two for the 2010 general election were ignored by the party leaders, and included only minor changes to the anti-strike laws.

Only once in the Blair-Brown years – at the 2005 party conference – did the unions submit a motion advocating change in the Thatcher-Blair anti-strike laws, though that motion called for only modest reforms rather than outright abo-

lition. In 2005 Blair suffered five straight defeats on the five conference motions debated. It could be done. But once the motions were passed, the union leaders let them slip into the archives with not even a murmur of pressure on the Labour leaders to respect them.

It was a similar story with the Iraq war.

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq all union representatives on the party's National Executive Committee voted – in breach of their own unions' policies – against a left-wing motion opposing the invasion of Iraq. They backed a vague motion which functioned as a licence for war.

After the invasion union delegates again ignored their unions' policies and unanimously agreed to "move to next business" when the issue of the invasion was raised on the National Executive Committee.

At the 2003 party conference motions on Iraq did not even win sufficient union support to be prioritised for debate.

At the following year's conference 90% of the union votes backed a bland platform statement uncritical of the invasion and proposing a vague and conditional timetable for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq. The same proportion of union votes was cast against a more critical RMT motion calling for an early date for troop withdrawal.

The basic problem was not that the block vote and affiliation held back unions. It was that the unions chose not to fight for their policies in the Labour Party, and failed to follow up their successes when they did vote down Blair at conference.

McCluskey: *"Could I go before the television cameras and pretend to speak on behalf of one million Unite members who pay the political fund, wanting to affiliate to the Labour Party? No, half of them don't even vote Labour. It was indefensible, and I don't want to be defending it."*

The Labour Party was established in order to provide a political voice for the working class, to give individual workers the chance to vote for representatives from their own organisations rather than for the lesser evil among the candidates of the rich.

Prior to 1909, when it was made illegal by a court ruling, unions simply took a collective decision about whether to affiliate to the Labour Party. If the union voted in favour of affiliation, it paid an affiliation fee and was given collective representation in the Labour Party. Until 1918 there was no individual membership. The local Labour Party organisation in most areas was the Trades Council.

Only 63,000 people voted Labour in 1900, when Labour's affiliated membership was 570,000 and the TUC's 1.2 million. Only 254,000 voted Labour in 1906, when Labour's affiliated membership was 900,000 and the TUC's 1.7 million.

The vote was low partly because Labour stood in few seats. It stood in few seats because it had done a deal with the Liberal Party, in force until 1916, to run only where the Liberals stood aside for Labour. If workers had been asked individually to "opt" Labour or Liberal, a majority at that stage would have opted Liberal.

But by setting up the Labour Party the trade unions had created a new political opening for workers.

No-one would suggest that trade union affiliation to CND or War on Want should be based only on the number of members who individually sign a piece of paper authorising a proportion of their dues being handed over to such campaigns.

Historically, the same outlook has governed trade union affiliation to the Labour Party: affiliation is a collective input from a collective organisation.

Falkirk: the dodgy dossier

The police have now confirmed that nothing in the Labour Party dossier on alleged irregularities in the recruitment of Labour Party members in Falkirk justifies a police investigation, never mind arrests.

Although the dossier remains "confidential" – it has not been seen by members of the party's National Executive Committee, by Unite, by Falkirk Labour Party officers, or by the two party members suspended on the basis of the dossier's accusations – more and more of its contents have leaked.

The dossier's Executive Summary claims:

"Members were recruited without their knowledge, members were pressurised into completing direct debit forms... signatures were forged on either application forms or direct debit mandates... members were recruited in an attempt to manipulate party processes."

But:

- The main body of the dossier does not support the contents of the Executive Summary.

- Only a handful of people, in just one or two families, were supposedly recruited without their knowledge (i.e. by other family members signing for them).

- Some of those who were supposedly unknowingly recruited are quoted as saying that they had been asked if they wished to join and had said that they did.

- None of the disputed party recruits were Unite members, none of them had been signed up under the "Union Join" scheme, and none of them had had their membership fees paid by Unite.

- No-one accused of wrongdoing was given an opportunity to answer the allegations before the dossier's authors set out their conclusions.

Yet it has come to light that one of the Labour Party's executive directors even suggested, on the basis of the dossier, that the Labour Party affiliation of Unite at a national level should be suspended.

Demands by Unite that there should be an independent inquiry into Falkirk have previously been rejected by Labour Party officials on the grounds that "there is an independent inquiry – by the police." Those officials are still refusing to accept an independent inquiry.

Instead, a spokesperson has announced: "As a result of the police decision, we will now pursue disciplinary action as a matter of urgency."

Labour officials say nothing about the "Progress" contender for nomination for the seat paying £130 by cheque for the membership fees of eleven new members he had recruited.

- **Lift the suspensions and restore control over the selection process to the local Labour Party!**

- **Scrap the 2012 cut-off date for participation in the selection process!**

- **An independent labour movement inquiry into Falkirk and the falsehoods in the dossier!**

The tortoise and the hare

The Left Unity group, launched in late 2012 by Andrew Burgin and Kate Hudson after they quit Respect, and given a boost in early 2013 by support from film-maker Ken Loach, plans a conference on 30 November to constitute itself as an organisation and adopt a political platform.

Burgin and Hudson are promoting a draft called the Left Party Platform. Its supporters include the Socialist Resistance group. Tom Walker, a former Socialist Worker journalist who quit early in 2013 and is now prominent in the SWP-splinter International Socialist Network (ISNers), writes, in support: "The Left Party Platform stands explicitly in the 'European Left Party' tradition, encompassing parties like Greece's Syriza, Germany's Die Linke, Portugal's Left Bloc, France's Front de Gauche..."

"We're told that it's a statement that almost anyone to the left of Labour could agree with. Yes — exactly! That's the point!" The draft is, as Walker puts it, "inclusive of socialism", but not explicitly socialist.

The main rival draft is the Socialist Platform, explained on this page by one of its authors, Nick Wrack.

Wrack was editor of *Militant* (forerunner of the SP's *The Socialist*) in the early 1990s, and has since then been prominent successively in the Socialist Alliance, SWP, Respect, and TUSC.

• More: leftunity.org

Nick Wrack: We have 79 names now, so I can't speak for the whole platform.

From the beginning of LU, there have been different approaches to what sort of party we want to come out of the process. Most people signed up because Ken Loach issued an invitation for people to debate and discuss a new party. He didn't set down any confines for that discussion.

A lot of us have been through similar experiences — Respect, the Socialist Alliance, the Scottish Socialist Party, or the Socialist Labour Party — and want to make sure we don't go down the same route again.

One of the things that struck some of us from the beginning was that a lot of the material being produced was extremely vague and nebulous, and probably deliberately so, so it didn't have to define exactly what the aims of the party would be.

Solidarity: Many people make that vagueness a virtue. They argue that it will help to garner wide electoral support from everyone to the left of the Labour Party, and that the Socialist Platform would narrow it down.

NW: Our aim should be to make socialist ideas popular, not to become popular by hiding them. The view that's shared by the platform signatories is that popularity based on appearing as all things to all people is not worth having. You're building on sand.

I believe that socialist ideas, explained patiently, are inspirational, and the socialist left has forgotten how to inspire people. One of the consequences of socialist ideas being in retreat in society is that even a section of the socialists them-

selves have become reluctant to argue openly for socialist ideas and socialist change. They think that, if you water your ideas down, you might get electoral support.

We'd prefer to play a longer game. This is not an overnight get-rich-quick exercise. We want to take socialist ideas into working-class communities and give them roots so they last. We don't want an ephemeral, here-today-gone-tomorrow success.

One of the criticisms that's been raised against the Platform is that it's too abstract, and that somehow we're not interested in day-to-day battles. But the statement itself is not a party programme, or a tactical recipe for the here and now, it's a statement of aims and principles.

Socialists obviously get involved in all working-class struggles, whether it's strikes, struggles in communities, or on campuses, but link those to a battle to change society fundamentally.

Solidarity: You mentioned some of the previous attempts to set up left electoral coalitions or parties. What lessons do you draw from those experiences?

NW: There are two fundamental lessons — whatever project we set up has to be socialist, and it has to be democratic.

There are also other factors behind the failure of those previous projects. You can't analyse the failures outside the historical context we live in. The last few decades have been a period of defeat for the working-class in Britain and elsewhere. Those failed attempts have been against that background of defeat and retreat.

The other thing we face in Britain, which doesn't exist to the same degree elsewhere in Europe, is a monolithic labour movement party. The idea that the Labour Party can simply be supplanted overnight is a big mistake. It will take a long time to challenge Labour. That's not to rule out smaller victories in isolated places to begin with. My position is that you work patiently over a period of time, and the electoral tactic is part of your work, not the be-all-and-end-all.

Solidarity: There seems to be another discussion going on inside Left Unity. Is this mainly an electoral vehicle, which supports struggles, but doesn't see itself as having a role in trying to initiate them, shape them, or propose policy for them? Or is LU trying to build something which is systematically active in everyday struggles?

NW: Left Unity hasn't actually been set up yet. It doesn't exist except in an inchoate, putative manner. The national conference in November will set up the new party, and what kind of party it is will be partially decided by the debates we have now. I would imagine that everyone involved in LU would say they are in favour of participating in and helping to build working-class struggles in their areas. Of course, we need to turn that into deeds.

In terms of elections, there is a danger in some of what's being said about attracting everyone to the left of Labour. Does that mean winning their conscious support for a set of ideas, or just capturing their votes?

What we've tried to do with the Platform is set out briefly and succinctly some basic socialist aims and principles. It's a bit disturbing that people who actually agree with those aims are arguing that the platform shouldn't be supported because it's "tactically wrong". If everyone who agreed with it supported it, there'd be no problem in getting it adopted in the conference.

What's your take on the debate?

Solidarity: Basically, that you and the Platform are right. Some people in LU seem to want to be an in-gathering of everyone under the sun — although sometimes excluding the existing left groups — that will somehow win wide electoral support, and that's it.

You're right that everyone in LU would say they're in favour of participating in and supporting struggles. But a socialist party or organisation doesn't just support struggles. It tries to organise for them, develop policies and strategies, and organise out of them. That active attitude doesn't seem to be anywhere near as widespread in LU.

Another concern is whether LU has enough puff to make it viable. It's not set up as the type of thing socialists can do at any scale, large or small, but as something that has to be fairly big or nothing. People talk of it as being as big as Syriza, which doesn't seem likely to us.

NW: Those are all concerns that people in the Socialist Platform would share. The people who have that view about LU becoming a force equivalent to Syriza over a very short period of time are going to be sorely disappointed.

In a sense it's the tortoise and the hare, and the Socialist Platform is the tortoise. Some of my comrades might not like that, but I think that's a good analogy.

The Socialist Platform

1. The [Left Unity] Party is a socialist party. Its aim is to bring about the end of capitalism and its replacement by socialism.

2. Under capitalism, production is carried out solely to make a profit for the few, regardless of the needs of society or damage to the environment. Capitalism does not and cannot be made to work in the interests of the majority. Its state and institutions will have to be replaced by ones that act in the interests of the majority.

3. Socialism means complete political, social and economic democracy. It requires a fundamental breach with capitalism. It means a society in which the wealth and the means of production are no longer in private hands but are owned in common. Everyone will have the right to participate in deciding how the wealth of society is used and how production is planned to meet the needs of all and to protect the natural world on which we depend. We reject the idea that the undemocratic regimes that existed in the former Soviet Union and other countries were socialist.

4. The [Left Unity] Party opposes all oppression and discrimination, whether on the basis of gender, nationality, ethnicity, disability, religion or sexual orientation and aims to create a society in which such oppression and discrimination no longer exist.

5. Socialism has to be international. The interests of the working class are the same everywhere. The [Left Unity] Party opposes all imperialist wars and military interventions. It rejects the idea that there is a national solution to the problems of capitalism. It stands for the maximum solidarity and cooperation between the working class in Britain and elsewhere. It will work with others across Europe to replace the European Union with a voluntary European federation of socialist societies.

6. The [Left Unity] Party aims to win support from the working class and all those who want to bring about the socialist transformation of society, which can only be accomplished by the working class itself acting democratically as the majority in society.

7. The [Left Unity] Party aims to win political power to end capitalism, not to manage it. It will not participate in governmental coalitions with capitalist parties at national or local level.

8. So long as the working class is not able to win political power for itself the [Left Unity] Party will participate in working-class campaigns to defend all past gains and to improve living standards and democratic rights. But it recognises that any reforms will only be partial and temporary so long as capitalism continues.

9. The [Left Unity] Party will use both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary means to build support for its ultimate goal — the socialist transformation of society.

10. All elected representatives will be accountable to the party membership and will receive no payment above the average wage of a skilled worker (the exact level to be determined by the party conference) plus legitimate expenses.

Martin Smith resigns from SWP

Martin Smith, the former Socialist Workers Party (SWP) leader at the centre of the scandal in the party relating to its handling of rape and sexual harassment complaints against him, has resigned.

His resignation comes in advance of a new internal party "hearing" to deal with a complaint of sexual harassment against him.

The party has (disingenuously) promised the hearing will be "swift and fair". (It has been delayed and postponed several times.) The complainant, known as "Comrade X", may have her hearing come "swiftly" now, but there is little chance it will be "fair" after the perpetrator has resigned and cannot be held to account.

• More: bit.ly/smith-resigns

Tories make racist play for Ukip votes

In July the Home Office launched a new anti-immigrant campaign. A mobile billboard was driven around north and west London with a giant poster warning “illegal immigrants go home, or get arrested.”

Even Nigel Farage of UKIP (that’s right, UKIP!) said the billboards were “deeply divisive and unnecessary”.

Yet the Tories felt able to defend the posters. Conservative MP Mark Harper said: “Let me clear this up once and for all – it is not racist to ask people who are here illegally to leave Britain. It is merely telling them to comply with the law.”

Every person who has spent any time in a UK primary school will know the psychology behind the words “go home”. This phrase is the equivalent of saying the N word or the P word. Something you can say without getting into trouble. If you’re still a bigot when you leave primary school, what you say then will be an overt racist term.

Whoever designed these posters understands that. The posters were designed to fan the flames of bigotry in this country in order to win back the votes of people who have recently voted Ukip.

The campaign is just one part of an escalating policy of brutality which includes Home Office drives to “round up” “illegal immigrants” – including spot checks on papers at railway stations.

Free Bradley Manning!

An American military court has found Bradley Manning guilty of espionage and a series of other charges that could carry a maximum 136 year sentence.

Manning released military documents to WikiLeaks, documents which included footage of a US military helicopter gunning down a father taking his children to school; evidence of a death squad operating in Afghanistan; and files showing that Guantánamo held dementia patients, taxi drivers and prisoners of the Taliban.

The proceedings were likened to a Stalinist show trial as a string of technicalities went in favour of the prosecution, and the press were stymied by the secrecy surrounding the case.

While waiting for his trial in military prison Manning was denied meaningful exercise, social interaction, sunlight, and on a number of occasions forced to stay completely naked.

In the event Manning was found not guilty charge of aid-

ing the enemy, but that may not deliver a lighter sentence. Manning is the latest of many whistleblowers who have been prosecuted using the 1917 Espionage Act. All on Barack Obama’s watch, the man who was elected President promising increased transparency and protection for whistleblower.

During the trial Manning gave an articulate and sober account of his motives for the leak, countering the propaganda that he had psychological problems and was a loose cannon. Manning’s testimony revealed an awareness of the personal risk and self-sacrifice that he was undertaking, and showed a degree of courage and confidence that revolutionary socialists should aspire to.

Where is the trade union and labour movement when all this is going on? Why is it not defending vulnerable migrant workers?

As the climate gets more hostile towards immigrants and more detrimental to the unity our class, we need to make the arguments for international working class solidarity.

It is our duty to take those ideas on to the streets, into workplaces and colleges. That is the only way to counter the flow of racist bile coming out of the government.

- No One is Illegal has a gathering on 1 September, 12.30 to 5, at the People’s History Museum, Left Bank, Spinningfields, Manchester M3 3ER. Write to No One is Illegal, c/o Bolton Socialist Club, 16 Wood Street, Bolton BL1 1DY.

- noi.org.uk

As we await the unwelcome news of his jail term, we must not forget his plight.

- bradleymanning.org

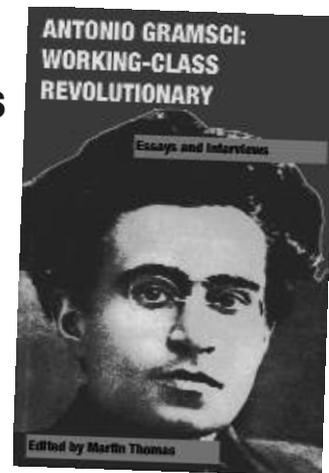
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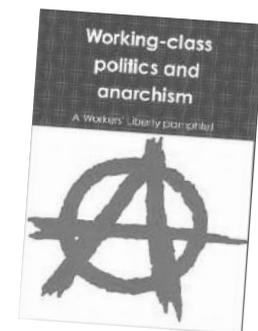
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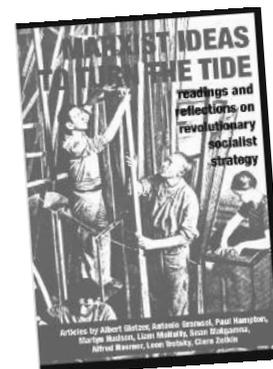


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Discussing

By Tom Harris

On Wednesday 17 July, Martin Thomas and I from AWL travelled to Thessaloniki, in northern Greece.

Soon after arriving, we went to the Thessaloniki headquarters of the public broadcaster ERT (Greek equivalent of the BBC), where a workers' occupation is defying the Samaras government's decision to shut down ERT. The building was covered with union banners. On the pavement outside and opposite was a crowd of supporters. Some hundreds gather there every evening: apparently it was 2000 at the start of the occupation. There were many left-wing banners there, some attached to buildings or railings, some carried on poles. Despite that, the gathering seemed more like a social occasion, with people chatting, than a political forum. There was music, not particularly political, and a fast-food van.

On Wednesday evening, after a couple of short speeches, the crowd formed up to march to Aristotelou Square in the city centre.

On the way comrades from the revolutionary socialist group OKDE used their megaphone to lead chants — for a political general strike, and others — and there are also a few chants led by a megaphone on the contingent with the banner from Pame, the KKE's (Communist Party's) political front.

The OKDE comrades told us that they had a leaflet, but were keeping it to distribute to the bigger crowd in Aristotelou. And their paper? "We sold them all yesterday, when there was a general strike".

Spiros from OKDE told us that the KKE — the major, defining organisation of the Greek left from the 1920s onwards — has no tradition of public paper-selling, maybe in part because it has spent so much of its life under one or another dictatorship. Its paper *Rizospastis* circulates through news-stands rather than through hand-to-hand sales. On Thursday evening we chanced upon a KKE rally in central Thessaloniki, near the Venizelos statue, and true enough there were plenty of KKE flags but no sign of *Rizospastis*, or indeed of the assembled KKE members making any effort to spread their message to passers-by.

Spiros thinks the Greek working class is still moving to the left, but it is an unspectacular, molecular process, a matter of "little things". The left is gradually winning more ground in the elections. New "first-level" unions are being formed or revitalised, though against those gains there are losses from the disappearance of unions when workplace shut.

In Thessaloniki, the Biome factory is still operating under workers' control. The 70 workers there make household cleaning materials and sell them themselves, directly to the public. "It is not such a big thing", said Spiros, but the idea of workers whose factories are abandoned by their owners taking them over is becoming more current.

When AWLers were last in Thessaloniki, in July 2012, the neighbourhood assembly movement was reduced to dribs and drabs. A year later, there are more neighbourhood assemblies, some running neighbourhood markets in liaison with suppliers from the countryside to provide food without middleman's profit. "People have become more disobedient". There is more activity by young workers, even though they are usually not union members.

What have OKDE's main activities been in Thessaloniki over the last year? Spiros said that the main area had been union activity. OKDE is active in the restaurant workers' union. In the last elections, the slate supported by OKDE got 100 votes. The slate supported by the KKE got 200 votes and kept control, but OKDE's 100 is more than the total number of votes cast in the union election a couple of years ago. OKDE has also been active in the teachers' union and among students.

Pasok, the old social-democratic party, elected to government in October 2009 with 44% of the vote but now a junior

2011 protest in Tirana

Developing a left in Albania

By Tom Harris

At the OKDE summer camp we met members of *Organizata Politike* (Political Organisation), an Albanian leftist group.

Their group came together in January 2011 after a big demonstration against the government, then led by the Democratic Party, the more right-wing of the two main parties. The demonstration against electoral fraud and corruption was called by the mainstream opposition party, the Socialist Party, but four people were killed by troops in Tirana.

The group now has around 30 people, some Marxists, some Trotskyists, some anarchists. They say what brings them together is anti-capitalism and a drive to break the cultural hegemony of right-wing and neo-liberal ideas in Albania.

From September 2011 to April 2012 they were able to publish a weekly paper, sold from news-stands on the basis of the news-stands keeping the sales money. They reckon a few hundred copies of each issue were bought, and the group got some new people from the effort. Then the money ran out.

Now they mostly get new supporters through their website and social centre. The entire group is in Tirana, where most young people have access to the internet. The group also buys up second-hand copies of books by Marx and Lenin now available cheap and in large quantities in Albania, to organise discussions round them. Most of the copies, they said, were previously owned by Stalinist bureaucrats, and are in good condition, showing few signs of having been read or even opened!

The *Organizata Politike*, they say, is all there is of a left in Albania. There are three or four parties, preaching nostalgia for the regime of the old Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha, but they attract only old people.

The Democratic Party and the Socialist Party call each other crazy right-wingers and crypto-communists respectively. In fact, the differences of policy are as slight as those between the Tories and New Labour in Britain.

The Socialist Party, after winning the election in June 2013, says it will introduce a mildly progressive income tax in place of the flat-rate tax in force under the Democratic Party government. The SP has also promised a free-at-the-point-use public health service, but will they introduce it?

Albania was the only country in Europe where German and Italian occupation armies were evicted during World War Two by local forces alone, without any Allied intervention. From 1944 it was a Stalinist state, under Enver Hoxha. Jealous of its autonomy, it first allied with Mao against Moscow, and then after 1976 declared China "revisionist" too.

After Hoxha died in 1985, his successor Ramiz Alia started pushing towards integration in the world market, and from

1991 managed a peaceful transition of Albania to world-market capitalism.

The transition has led to vast job cuts in mines and other large industrial units. "The majority of the Albanian working class", the OP people told us, "are emigrating to Greece or Italy, or moving to Tirana. What's expanding is the informal economy, drug dealing, remittances from Albanians working abroad, road construction, corruption, and privatisation".

Do people want the old Hoxhaist regime back? The OP comrades raised their eyebrows: of course not. There is some admiration for some achievements of the old regime — there really was free health care and free education, unlike in Stalin's Russia or Mao's China — but those achievements were made mostly by "voluntary labour", unpaid labour conscripted by the state. And after Albania's falling-out with China in 1976-8, things went downhill.

Foreign investment? There is some. But mostly it is asset-stripping, or the establishment only of small enterprises, like call centres. There is nothing comparable to the factories which Volkswagen has established in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Ukraine.

There are two union federations, one linked to the SP, one linked to the DP, both "totally corrupt" and with small memberships.

About 46% of the population is still rural. But the people in the countryside have only small plots of land, and do not produce much for sale. A lot of food is imported, and many rural households depend on remittances from abroad or from the cities.

How do the people who flood from the countryside to Tirana live? They build themselves houses — not shanty-towns exactly, because these are houses built of concrete, and (somehow) with electricity and water supplies, but not planned development either. Across Albania, the OP people said, a common sight is houses with one storey built and inhabited, and a second storey half-built and awaiting a new remittance from abroad to finance completion.

Maybe 80% of the population would favour reunification with Kosova (which is Albanian-inhabited, but was seized by Serbia in 1913). But the US and the EU want to avoid complications with Serbia and with Macedonia (the population of which is one-third Albanian) which would flow from reunification. The US ambassador is a big figure in Albanian politics, with his views attended to on all questions.

Hoxha's Albania was the world's only-ever atheist state, with religious observance banned by law. Has that banning produced, in reaction, an upsurge of religiosity since then?

"A little, but not much. For a while it was considered trendy among the youth to be religious, especially Catholic [Albania has been historically majority-Muslim, with a Catholic minority]. But now it's mostly old people who go to church or mosque".

with Greek socialists

Teachers to strike against sackings

Greek school teachers are set to strike from early September even if the government “conscripts” them as it did in May, putting them under military discipline so that striking becomes legally equivalent to desertion from the army.

The Greek government has said 2,122 teachers in technical high schools will be suspended from their jobs. They will be put on 75% pay and in redeployment status for eight months, then sacked if they have not found new jobs. 50 out of 110 departments in technical high schools will be closed.

The government has also said it will suspend another 8,000 public sector workers (1,500 teachers among them) between now and the end of September, the first round of 160,000 suspensions planned by the end of 2015.

School caretakers’ jobs have been abolished across Greece; their work will be done by school principals or contracted out.

The government plans to reevaluate school structures, cancel selected positions and make all workers reapply for the remaining jobs.

A high school teachers’ strike was called off in May in the face of government threats. Since then, a new left-wing leadership (Syriza and Antarsya) has been elected to the high-school teachers’ federation; it says it will strike from September if even one teacher is suspended, and regardless of military-mobilisation orders.

There are about 80,000 teachers in Greek high schools, half of them union members. In Greece the “union” is the local organisation covering a workplace, or a few workplaces — for teachers, a group of schools covering several hundred or a thousand teachers. The broader organisation covering the whole sector is the “federation”, constituted by delegates from the local unions.

Primary school teachers have a separate (bigger) federation. Traditionally it follows the initiatives of the high school teachers’ federation.

In a discussion at their summer camp OKDE members stressed the importance of convening General Assemblies of the local teachers’ unions and arguing for them to elect strike committees rather than leaving the dispute in the hands of the union officials.

Weaknesses were identified. The new left-wing leadership of the high school federation announces better decisions than other federations, but has only limited capacity to organise for them. Demonstrations at the end of the summer term often had poor turn-outs. Some schools have low levels of union membership. The general level of political awareness and confidence among teachers is low.

Some OKDE teachers argued that teachers must aim for a wider strike of public sector workers and set the goal of that strike as bringing down the government. “It is different if the government falls as a result of a movement” [rather than just through an election].

Others questioned both arguments. So there is a strike and the government falls? Then there is an election and a new government? Then a new strike to bring down the new government? Then another election...? The strike demand should be for the reinstatement of the suspended teachers.

A teacher-only strike could win that, and the willingness of one section of workers to go ahead with an indefinite strike which looks like winning is what we need to start a snowball for a general strike, after which the government might indeed fall.

Against that, it was argued that “teachers are very clear that the government must fall, but equally clear that teachers on their own can’t achieve that. The level of consciousness may be low now, but it can make big leaps in a crisis.”

A display of OKDE’s leaflets for cafe, bakery, and restaurant workers in Thessaloniki

coalition partner to the conservative New Democracy and on just 7% in the opinion polls, is “finished”, said Spiros. It was never a party which came out of the workers’ movement like the British Labour Party or the German SPD. [It was founded in 1974 by Andreas Papandreou, former deputy prime minister in a government of the liberal Centre Union]. It was, said Spiros in a startling analogy, inspired more by the Ba’thists than by traditions of the workers’ movement.

On Thursday 18th and Friday 19th we met people from other strands of the Greek left.

The first was Dimitris Souftas of NAR, the biggest group in the Antarsya coalition and one that aspires to a “communist refoundation in which all the communist sub-ideologies will have something to offer”. Dimitris has a job with the educational department of the union federation GSEE. Although his wage is only 5000 euros a year, he hasn’t been paid since June 2011. How was he surviving? “From odd jobs”.

KOKKINO

In the evening of Thursday 18th we met comrades from Kokkino, one of the Trotskyist groups in Syriza.

Amalia, a member of the Left Platform in Syriza and a Kokkino sympathiser, works as an English teacher in a private school. Vast numbers of Greek school students attend private schools in the afternoons and evenings, after going to state schools earlier in the day, particularly to improve their English. Amalia explained that everyone in Greek state schools studies English from the age of nine. Why, we asked, is the teaching of English in state schools considered so inadequate that the private schools thrive? The classes are too big, said Amalia.

On Friday 19th we talked with Nicos Anastasiadis from DEA, the bigger Trotskyist group in Syriza. Nicos is a maths teacher in a state school in a small town outside Thessaloniki. We met Nicos at the Arch of Galerius, one of the sizeable structures remaining in Thessaloniki from its time as an important city in the Roman Empire.

There were more posters plastered round the Arch, and elsewhere in Thessaloniki, and more political graffiti too, than in July 2012. We had asked Amalia of Kokkino about that. Yes, she said, that is true. The left has grown only a bit over the last year, but there is “more will”. “Things are harsher”.

As in 2012, Thessaloniki does not at first sight look like a city plunged into pauperism. The street cafes are bustling,

the bus service is good; there are shuttered shops, and there are beggars, but no more than in British cities. This is not like the Omonia district of Athens, which has plunged. But we know that one of the reasons why poverty is less visible in Thessaloniki is that things have got worse. In 2012 there were large numbers of African and Asian migrants selling small items on the streets of Thessaloniki, usually from sheets spread on the pavement. Now there are few: the cops have chased them away.

When workers have huge pay cuts, or lose their jobs, the blocks of flats in which they live do not immediately turn into slums. The workers’ clothes, when they go out onto the streets, have not been instantly transformed into rags. But the working-class anger is there.

On Saturday 20th we got the coach organised by OKDE to go to its summer camp in western Greece. The coach travelled along the Egnatia Odos, the main east-west highway of Greece, built between the 1990s and 2009. The highway is named after the ancient Roman Via Egnatia, which ran from Constantinople west through Thessaloniki to the Adriatic. The journey showed us how sparsely populated the mountainous hinterland of Greece is.

The campsite in which OKDE had booked a section is right next to the beach, and OKDE had set up a drinks-and-snacks kiosk, a bookstall, an area with cafe-type tables, and an area for meetings.

Through the week, there were political sessions in the morning and the evening, followed later by films, music and poetry. In the afternoon, people slept, played (many children came), swam, played chess, read, relaxed. The sun was warm and bright without being oppressively hot, and the sea clear and ideal for swimming.

The political sessions included: Turkey; Cyprus; the Greek revolutionary socialist movement between the World Wars; the life and ideas of Pantelis Pouliopoulos; the struggle against fascism and war; the crisis of contemporary culture; workshop sessions for students, for teachers, and for other workers to discuss OKDE activity in those respective fields; and presentations by two of the invited socialist groups from other countries, one from AWL on “Third Camp” Trotskyism and one from Lutte Ouvriere on the political situation in France and the PSA Aulnay dispute.

People from an Albanian socialist group and from the French group L’Etincelle also attended.

• Much more at www.workersliberty.org/greece13

The spirit of utopia and the art of healing

“Sanatorium” is one of ten installations that make up the Whitechapel Gallery’s summer exhibition, “The Spirit of Utopia”. The title alludes to Ernst Bloch’s three volumes, written in 1917. The exhibition is described as “a remarkable series of installations and events [which] engage us in playful, provocative and creatively pragmatic models for social change”. Here, Isobel Urquhart reviews “Sanatorium”.

In “Sanatorium”, Mexican artist Pedro Reyes creates a mockup of a clinical setting, with six rooms offering a different “therapy”, which is facilitated by volunteers in white lab coats in the role of “therapists”.

Visitors to the gallery can sample these game-like experiences by booking appointments and signing an indemnity form stating that they know that it’s not a real hospital and that the volunteers are not therapists.

Activities range from reflectively curating a museum of your own lifetime, using a range of small objects, to discussing a burning question you have asked by rolling philosophical dice, to bashing seven bells out of a dummy that stands in for someone who has done you harm or inventing your own relaxation techniques.

Reyes’ “Sanatorium” intends to respond to the fact that our cities contain vast populations of unattended victims of depression, loneliness, neurosis, family violence, suicide, and other pathologies. “Sanatorium” proposes that there are better alternatives — but not political ones — to the pharmaceutical profiteering that lies at the heart of how we currently tend to heal ourselves in modern urban society.

It bills itself as a “test of sociatry”, a term glossed by Reyes as “the science and art of healing society” and its utopian vision is that the kinds of working structures proposed by “Sanatorium” might, if they became part of our ordinary way of life, address the stresses of urban living.

“Sanatorium” therefore is an imagined world in which therapy, a luxury few can afford, is deprofessionalised and shared out amongst ordinary people. In the better world imagined by Reyes, where his approach becomes something of a social franchise, we might all be opened up to our surplus capacity to help others.

The various activities draw on healing rituals from a wide variety of traditions — sorcery, confession, cathartic therapy, the consolations of philosophy, as well as emancipatory Frierian educational practices, and related theatre techniques in which gallery visitors participate as “spect-actors” as a

way of taking responsibility for themselves as members of communities and as beings capable of knowing (of knowing that they know and knowing that they don’t) in order to create a more democratic society. It is thus the participants who actually make the artwork: they provide the material, their own stories, the questions, and the discussions for the events.

Just as in a Brechtian play, even though participants are aware of the set up, that doesn’t prevent it from doing the trick. Participants decide to believe — temporarily — just as when people agree to play a fantasy game or share a joke.

CONSCIOUSNESS

But let’s be realistic. A performative art installation in an art gallery, even one as committed as the Whitechapel to including its local communities, is hardly where the working class is going to go to have its consciousness raised.

For those with a more politicised view, attempts to heal a moribund society may seem tiresomely beside the point and a contemptuous waste of people’s time and energy.

Seen from a critique that places them within a petty-bourgeois ideology, Reyes’ ideas have little relevance for workers or the activists reading this paper. Reyes becomes simply one of “a bunch of dreamers who imagine that an art context gives social significance to weak or wacky ideas”, and whose “irresponsibility would be funny, if the problems addressed weren’t so pressing and so serious.” (Sarah Kent, ICA).

It is then the lack of radicalism in some of the exhibits that leads Jonathan Jones, in an otherwise positive review in the *Guardian*, to expostulate: “Where are the Marxists when you need them?”

So is there anything the political activist visiting the “Sanatorium” might gain, other than apoplexy or sniggering?

It seems right first of all to note Whitechapel Gallery’s art history purpose in recognising this resurgence in the art world of a commitment to social critique. And that it has history — both in terms of the Gallery’s own past and its place in the history of the East End of London, and also in looking back to that earlier burst of utopianism that inspired Bloch’s life work.

We can also see in these art works expressions of a far wider re-energised but febrile critique of the busted flush that is capitalism, fuelled in part by the shock of the financial crisis in 2008.

As with Occupy, the restlessness for change seems all over the place ideologically and this is reflected in the fragmented glimpses of utopia in the exhibition. For long decades, on the other hand, the left has mourned the apparent death of socialism — as an idea, let alone as a viable political entity. All around us now, there is a renewed creativity and willingness to join in the social and political critique of capitalist society.

We see this not just in the cerebral world of politics or philosophy but also out in the everyday world: in popular struggle and in the surge of imagination and creativity in music, street art, spoken word events and performative artworks that has accompanied — as art always does — the revolutions, protests, riots, and rallies of recent years.

In “The Spirit of Utopia” we see laid out before us the concerns and longings shared by many in today’s modern western capitalist society. These include a better relationship with the earth and its limited resources, a more peaceful world, a world where it’s possible for people to have agency over their lives, and the conflicts between time and money are resolved in favour of workers’ rights to work without precarity and with time to enjoy life.

What “Sanatorium” brings to the dreaminess of utopia is perhaps then the affective — our desire for change and a better world, the euphoric excitement of the dream, and its darker relationship to our sense of loss, shame, disappointment, and other psychological manifestations: anxiety, depression and despair.

It is entirely correct that, a hundred years on from our century of disillusion with the utopian, artists can only reflect back to us broken dreams, fitful glimpses of that spirit of utopia, that we must fit together as best we can.

• “The Spirit of Utopia” is open until 5 September at the Whitechapel Gallery. For more information, see whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/the-spirit-of-utopia

Cinema for socialism!

On 5 August Workers’ Liberty Sheffield held a film showing of *The Navigators*, the Ken Loach film about railway privatisation written by Workers’ Liberty member Rob Dawber, who died of mesothelioma contracted from exposure to asbestos during his time as a track worker.

The showing, which included food and drink, raised £75 and featured a discussion about the fight for public ownership today.

Workers’ Liberty branches in North East London and South London are also planning an ongoing series of film showings. North East London’s next showing takes place on Sunday 18 August at Menard Hall, Galway Street, London EC1V 3SW.

It begins at 3pm. Tickets, which include food and drink, are priced at £8/£4 (waged/unwaged).

Clarence Chrysostom, 1921-2013

By Bruce Robinson

Clarence Chrysostom, who died on 5 July aged 92, was one of last survivors of the early revolutionary period of the Sri Lankan Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), one of the few Trotskyist parties in history so far to win a mass following.

Joining as a young man, he later sided with the revolutionary minority when the leadership joined a bourgeois coalition in 1964. He came to England shortly afterwards and, after a very brief membership of Gerry Healy’s Socialist Labour League, joined the International Marxist Group, becoming part of the pro-Labour party faction round Al Richardson in 1968-9.

This faction later became the Chartist group in the Labour Party, in which Clarence was active through the 1970s. Subsequently he was involved with the research and publication efforts of Socialist Platform and the *Revolutionary History* journal, and in Hampstead Labour Party.

Clarence continued to attend the London circuit of left meetings and demos for as long as he was able. He retained a wider interest in the revolutionary left in Britain and Sri Lanka, corresponding with ex-LSSP comrades, particularly Prins Rajasooriya.

Though not in an organisation, Clarence was not dismissive of those who were and one of the first questions he always asked me when I visited him was: “Have you got your paper?” He perhaps identified with a generic Trotskyism that

Clarence was a member of the LSSP in its revolutionary phase. It was one of the few Trotskyist parties in history so far to have won a mass following.

no longer existed, but at the same time had a sharp eye for the foibles of the left, which he would discuss with an impish grin and a chuckle. One favourite topic was the twists and turns of the career of Ken Livingstone, whom he had known in the early years of his rise.

As was pointed out at his funeral, Clarence was not a star either as theoretician or organiser. He was, however, in his personal qualities — lack of ego or concern for material advancement, generosity and solidarity — as well as his solid, lifelong political commitment, the sort of person who forms the bedrock of the revolutionary movement.

The tragedy of the Biafran War

The Biafran war began in July 1967 and ended with the surrender of Biafra in January 1970. The Biafrans, in south east Nigeria, were fighting for independence; the Nigerian army was fighting to keep the state intact. Perhaps two million people died as a result of the war, the majority from malnutrition or disease. Mark Osborn looks at the events.

I was born in 1961. And, like me, many people my age have two sets of black and white TV images in their heads. The first is of the US moon landing: "One small step for a man," and Buzz Aldrin bouncing about. That was intensely exciting and impressive; I sat on the carpet in my pyjamas, eyes wide. The Americans are on the moon!

The second is of black children with stick-thin legs and arms and swollen tummies. I had seen black children before — a black family had just moved into a house on my road in north Leeds. But the Biafran kids on the BBC news just did not look right, sat in the dirt, motionless, exaggerated skulls almost hairless. It was impossible not to stare, shocked.

In 1968 I bundled up clothes for the *Blue Peter* appeal, to help buy a hospital truck for Nigeria-Biafra. Mum posted the brown paper parcel; so did a million other mums and dads.

Blue Peter presenter Valerie Singleton told us: "We're not going to say who is right or wrong [Nigeria or Biafra]. All we can say is that war is always wrong."

I know now what Val Singleton must have known then, but was unable to say: Nigeria was wrong. And more than that, the people who had created the conditions for that war were the British — by the way they had constituted Nigeria, the way they had run Nigeria and the way they had left Nigeria independent in 1960.

By 1968, the British Labour government's pro-Nigeria policy, explicitly designed to serve big oil, was directly leading to the deaths of tens of thousands of children as they aided and armed the incompetent and corrupt Nigerian military.

The story of Biafra is a scandal. But why study it? Partly because without this history it is impossible to understand why modern Nigeria is like it is — why much of the north lives under Sharia law; why the Nigerian military is so corrupt; why Nigerian politics is set up so that gangs of politicians elbow each other aside in order to rob the people.

The state of Nigeria was drawn together in stages by British imperialism to maintain profitable conditions for trade and exploitation by British capital, and to fend off other

Above: map of southern Nigeria. Biafra is the lighter area.

powers, especially France.

The British had been systematically intimidating, bullying, and, if necessary, overthrowing local rulers. In 1892, for example, the Maxim gun, capable of firing 2,000 rounds in three minutes, destroyed the Ijebu army at Yemoja River.

As Hilaire Belloc wrote: "Whatever happens we have got /the Maxim Gun and they have not."

In the three decades after 1885, a series of complicated administrative and governmental reorganisations took place. Modern Nigeria was founded in 1914 under Governor Frederick Lugard by formally bringing together the very different Northern and Southern Protectorates, although the British maintained the regional differences.

Nigeria brought together hundreds of different ethnic groups, with very different histories and traditions, with a Muslim/Christian, north/south divide.

INDIRECTLY

Lugard had adopted the model of British Indian policy for the Muslim north of Nigeria, where he interfered as little as possible with the social structures and ruled indirectly through the local emirs.

As a concession he allowed Sharia law to co-exist alongside British law; he agreed with the Caliph that Christian missionaries would be kept out.

The British ruled Nigeria through the most reactionary local ruling class, in the most backward area of the country, by accommodating to its backwardness.

In the south, however, Christian teachers brought education as well as religion. As literacy in the north stood at 2%, many southerners filled administrative roles in the north. Special areas in northern town such as Kano and Zaria (called Sabon Gari) were reserved for non-Muslims, and especially the Igbo from the south east.

By independence, in October 1960, official politics was largely divided up by regional parties resting on ethnic bases. Nigeria had a federal constitution with three regions each dominated by one of the three largest of Nigeria's ethnic components (Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo). The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) dominated in the Hausa-Fulani areas and initially ruled with the National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC), with a base in the south east. In the south west, with a Yoruba majority, the Action Group party split (the leader of its "radical" wing was jailed), allowing a section of its old leadership to link up with the NPC.

Eskor Toyo, a leftist and trade unionist, commented that the split in the Action Group was caused by the different strategies of "Yoruba feudal and capitalist leaders". One section "wanted the Action Group to join the Federal government in order that the Yoruba Chiefs and businessmen might join the Federal 'chop-chop'", while the other "wanted to expand to other regions and ... grab the whole Federal 'chop'."

The ethnic polarisation got worse as the various elites scrambled among themselves for power and the ability to en-

rich themselves by access to the central state. The census (on which regional vote allocation depended) was rigged; regional elections in the west were also fixed to favour those politicians now in the Federal government in alliance with northerners. In the last six months of 1965 two thousand people died in political violence in the west.

By 1966, Nigeria's post-independence political structure had reached breaking point. In that year there were two coups. The first, in January, a "radical coup", was led by Majors and junior officers — mainly Igbos from the south east.

They stated: "Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high places that seek bribes and demand ten percent."

The prime minister, Tawafa Balewa, a northerner, was killed, as were a number of other prominent politicians and northern military figures. Although the coup failed, and the leaders surrendered in return for immunity, power fell into the hands of the army. A government was formed by an Igbo army leader, Johnson Aguyi-Ironsi.

Increasingly the northern elites came to see the January coup as aimed at them, organised by the Igbos of the south east and endangering their privileges. Ironsi attempted to centralise the state, provoking anti-Igbo riots in the north.

REBELLION

On 28 July 1966, a military rebellion broke out in the north, and became a northern counter-coup. Ironsi was killed. The original aim of this coup's leaders appears to have been northern secession from Nigeria.

They were dissuaded by, among others, the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cummings-Bruce, who later claimed he had stopped the break-up by using his personal links with the northern emirs, explaining: "We all shared a love of polo, and so of course we all met socially." He later added, "I sometimes wonder whether I did the right thing, keeping Nigeria together."

Anti-Igbo pogroms swept the north and thousands of Igbos were killed. A million Igbos fled to the south east.

The new military government, led by northerner Yakubu Gowon, was not able or willing to end the murders.

The weak central military government then attempted to stabilise the political situation. An agreement was apparently reached among the military for a very loose confederation, where the Nigerian regions would have a great deal of power, with a weak central state. But Gowon pulled later back from this agreement.

On May 30 1967 the military head of the eastern region, Oxford-educated Odumegwu Ojukwu, with the authorisation of a consultative assembly, announced that the region had left Nigeria and declared the formation of the Republic of Biafra.

The new state had a population of 14 million (65% Igbo)

Continued on page 12

Nigeria 2013

- Nigeria has a population of 175 million. 50% are Muslim; 40% Christian.

- 63% are under 24 years of age; 112 million (70%) are living in poverty; official unemployment is about 24%.

- Life expectancy is 52. 39% of the population are illiterate.

- There are 250 ethnic groups (the largest are: Hausa and Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21% and Igbo 18%); 500 languages are spoken.

- Nigeria is ranked by Transparency International at 139th (of 176 countries) for corruption. Since 1960 it is estimated that \$300 to \$400 billion has been stolen by corrupt government officials.

- According to the World Bank, most of Nigeria's vast oil wealth is siphoned off by the richest 1% of the population.

Nigerian oil workers on strike in 2012

Continued from page 11

across an area the size of Scotland. Biafra contained much of Nigeria's vast oil reserves.

The Biafran flag was Marcus Garvey-inspired red, black, and green stripes with a rising sun in the centre. Their anthem was set to the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius's *Finlandia* (apparently chosen because of the Finns' history of resistance to foreign domination). The first verse went:

"Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish, beloved homeland of our brave heroes; we must defend our lives or we shall perish,

"We shall protect our hearth from all our foes; but if the price is death for all we hold dear,

"Then let us die without a shed of fear."

The war began as Gowon's forces moved into Biafra on 6 July, expecting an easy victory. Gowon described his military's move as a "police action".

However the war lasted for 30 months, with the Biafrans showing great tenacity against great odds. Biafra took guns from the Eastern Bloc until the USSR sensed a political advantage to backing Nigeria. Then the Biafrans were armed by France, through Gabon. They also stole weapons from those they were fighting against, and manufactured their own, including a formidable forerunner of the improvised explosive device now common in guerrilla warfare. They improvised an airforce, and landed planes in hidden jungle airstrips.

Biafra was formally recognised by Gabon, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia. It was backed by France and Israel. The US remained neutral. By 1968, aid agencies were air-lifting large amounts of food to starving people in Biafra.

The Nigerian state had been constituted so that the northern population had a majority over the west and east combined. The north took the majority of seats in the parliament.

In the 1940s and 50s, the main centres of anti-colonial agitation were in the south, among Igbo and Yoruba peoples, other minorities, and by their parties. One of their demands was that Nigeria be broken up into a larger number of re-

gions so as to break up the northern bloc.

The northern political elite opposed an end to colonial rule, and when the issue was forced on them they demanded the three-region status quo continue. The British were happy that their friends in the north would continue to rule; the south accepted continued northern domination in order to be rid of the British.

When the fighting started in 1967 the British Foreign Office was clear: "We have a great deal at stake in Nigeria. Shell BP has sunk £250m in Nigeria. Other investments are worth £150-175m and we have an export trade worth £90m a year... The whole of our investments in Nigeria... will be at risk if we change our policy of support for the Federal government. The French would be glad to pick up our oil concessions if they could." The British policy was to back the people they thought would win: the Nigerian army.

But the Labour government found itself under increasing pressure. The Biafrans made a great deal of very effective propaganda during the war, and by 1968 the British press was carrying front-page horror stories and pictures of starving children. A major killer of children was kwashiorkor — a protein deficiency which gave the starving Biafran children swollen bellies.

However, Wilson's concern was the Nigerian state's blockade, which included preventing Shell BP oil exports. Labour Minister George Thomas was sent to Lagos to negotiate: "If Gowon is helpful on oil, Mr. Thomas will offer a sale of anti-aircraft guns." In fact, Gowon refused to lift the blockade, but got the guns anyway. He also got British armoured cars and military advisors. (The Russians gave Ilyushin bombers, MIGs, and heavy artillery.)

In 1969, with an election looming in the UK, Labour decided a quick victory for the Federal state was the least embarrassing option and increased arms supplies five-fold.

In November 1969, John Lennon returned his OBE. Writing to Harold Wilson he explained he was opposed to British support for the US in Vietnam and for the Nigerian state against Biafra.

By 1968 the Biafrans had lost their ports and were land-

locked, but still they fought.

The Nigerian army had been greatly expanded, from 10,000 in 1966 to 250,000 in 1969. (The Biafran forces had also grown from 3,000 in 1967 to 30,000 at the end of the war.) At the end of 1969 the Nigerian state launched a massive offensive which cut Biafra in half. Ojukwu fled, and the Biafrans surrendered on 13 January 1970.

Although Gowon promised a just peace, the reality was different. Political parties based on ethnic groups were banned. Igbos returning to pre-war homes often found others in their property; the government felt no need to give Igbos who had fled for their lives their government jobs back.

In a deliberate blow aimed at the Igbo leadership and middle class, pre-war Nigerian currency held by Igbos was not recognised. Igbos were "compensated" with N£20, no matter how much was in their bank account.

The legacy of the Biafra war continues to haunt Nigeria, where the war is still not clearly, openly discussed. Nigeria remains a badly constituted state that has suffered staggeringly corrupt military governments from 1966-79 and 1983-98. The legacy of British rule is widespread Islamist violence in the north, and vast poverty in an oil-rich country.

More reading on Biafra

***There Was A Country*, by Chinua Achebe (2012). This book was published just before the author's death, in March 2013. Achebe is a famous author, best known for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. He participated in the war as a Biafran "cultural ambassador".**

***Half Of A Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006). A fantastic novel, soon to be released as a film.**

***The Biafran War*, by Michael Gould (2012). A history of the war.**

Women in men's skies?

Camila Bassi reviews Liz Millward's *Women in British Imperial Airspace, 1922-1937* (2008, McGill-Queen's University Press)

The period of 1922 to 1937 represented significant inter-war development of gendered airspace within the British Empire.

From 1922, when the International Commission on Air Navigation debated the place of women in commercial airspace, to 1937, the year in which the female pilot Jean Batten completed her last long-distance record-breaking flight, the British Empire was at its peak, ruling about one-quarter of the world's territory. Millward notes:

"The interwar period was a window of possibility for many young white women in the British Empire. The First World War had undermined powerful old certainties. Women who were determined to learn the lessons of the past turned to internationalism, pacifism, nationalism, and fascism as they looked for ways to control the future."

Millward's concern is with the contestations of female pilots in producing, defining, and accessing civilian airspace during this time. What's more, she is interested in how such struggles were bound up with different kinds of airspace: the private, the commercial, the imperial, the national, and the body; that in turn had their own relations of gender, class, race, sexuality, nationalism, and imperialism.

Like many geographers seeking a radical understanding of space, Millward draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre, who wrote that "a revolution which does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses".

Millward concludes that post-war airspace had the potential to be what Lefebvre coined, capitalist "abstract space" par excellence, specifically, in its commodification, bureaucratisation, and decorporealisation.

In one sense it is a curious application of Lefebvre, given Lefebvre's focus on the city. Lefebvre denounces capitalist urbanity for its drive to repress play and prioritise produc-



Jean Batten

tivity and rationality. He also recognises potential within the centrality of the urban, meaning that a whole range of social interactions converge.

For Lefebvre, all people have the right to space, i.e. to access and participate fully in urban life, thus the constraints placed on this possibility by capitalism must be critiqued (Lefebvre, 1991; Shields, 1988). Lefebvre's interest lies in working out the spatial strategies for social change and, as such, his ideas resonate with

the French Situationists (with their slogan of May 1968 "beneath the pavement, the beach") and Britain's "Reclaim the Streets" movement of the 1990s.

FEMINIST

Millward concludes that notable female pilots modelled achievement and "beat the men", so, in effect, supported wider feminist struggles and proved that women were part of airspace.

Nonetheless, civilian airspace was naturalised as masculine and had the potential to become abstract space. She ends: "'To change life,' writes Lefebvre, 'we must first change space'. Women pilots tried to do just that."

Reflecting on the book as a whole, I wonder: what does Millward gain from a poststructuralist feminist approach? Such an approach emphasises the discursive and contingent nature of all identities with particular focus on the construction of gendered subjectivities. This intersectional analysis combines the cultural and economic features of gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and class.

"Capitalism", "imperialism" and "class" are given wider definitional scope: capitalism and imperialism as social, cultural, political, and economic relations, and class as a cultural construct (to include the economic but differing from

simply wage-labour). So, rather than asking what is gained, perhaps the real question is — what is lost? Actually, rather a lot I think.

In the context of all that is solid melting into air, I cannot help but sense that the book would have been a richer account had the dialectics of the struggles been fully explored. Three aspects of dialectical materialist thinking would have strengthened the study: firstly, looking for the interrelationship between phenomena to other phenomena (past and present, and including apparent opposites); secondly, seeing conditions (and relations) of existence in continual movement; and lastly, comprehending societal processes moving through contradictory tensions.

Moreover, the book missed (or rather, seemed to bypass) the centrality of class and imperialism and its intersection with gender, race, sexuality, and nationalism. I'll end, before any retort accuses me of crude economic determinism and class reductionism, with the words of Engels (1890):

"If somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase.

"We make history ourselves, but first of all, under very definite assumptions and conditions...history is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a variety of particular conditions of life.

"Thus, there are innumerable crisscrossing forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant — the historical event."

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Assessing Chavismo

Pablo Velasco continues his assessment of the legacy of Hugo Chávez by looking at some of the aspects of his government most lauded by the left.

Welfare spending

Probably the most common argument made by pro-Chávez supporters is that the extent of welfare spending makes Chavismo a social-democratic reformist project that socialists should support, albeit critically.

The Chávez government prioritised the “missions”, programmes in the areas of health (Barrio Adentro), education (Robinson, Ribas and Sucre) and food distribution (Mercal).

According to official government figures poverty declined from 44% in 1998 to 27% in 2012 and the tendency is downward, while extreme poverty dropped from 17% to 7% for the same period. As well as meeting basic needs, these programmes have given previously excluded communities some control over their lives.

But building a school or putting more doctors into hospitals is not socialism. These welfare measures were a product of the peculiar mode of rule Chávez established in Venezuela. The missions are social interventions to shore up and develop political support for the government. They are part of the state, directly funded by it and bound to its priorities. Principally, the missions are the main means by which oil rents are distributed directly to potential supporters. Those employed by the missions often worked for the Chávez movement in elections.

The improvements should be put in perspective. Other Latin American states such as Chile, Uruguay and Costa Rica have also reduced poverty and inequality while improving child mortality and literacy, on a capitalist basis with bourgeois-democratic governments. The Venezuelan missions are funded from the oil revenue — Barrio Adentro was possible because Cuba made available 20,000 health professionals and doctors in exchange for oil.

But despite Venezuela’s energy resources, there are power cuts. Workers face shortages of basic goods such as flour, eggs, sugar and even petrol. Recently there has been massive shortages of toilet paper. Just as with the Stalinist states in Eastern Europe and in Cuba, the provision of basic goods and welfare does not make the regime more progressive, particularly when it is in exchange for social acquiescence and political subordination.

Cooperatives

Early on, the Chávez government began lauding the role of cooperatives. It backed companies for social production (EPS), often in factories abandoned by their owners.

Before Chávez there were only 2,500 cooperatives in Venezuela. At their high point in 2004-06, there were apparently 200,000 cooperatives registered by the Venezuelan government.

The vast majority of cooperatives consist of about five members (the minimum required by law), largely bound by family ties. Furthermore some members of cooperatives have pocketed the start-up capital granted by the state or the advances on contracts received from the public sector. Other cooperatives were fronts for existing private companies, which took advantage of state-financed cooperative businesses as sources of non-unionised labour and cheap credit. The oversight agency SUNACOOOP has taken legal proceedings against several hundred cooperatives accused of misuse of public funds. Currently around 70,000 are registered, suggesting a dramatic decline in their functioning.

The coops that have survived have not served as vehicles of workers’ emancipation. Instead they have institutionalised the informal economy. Taking strike action is difficult where everyone is supposed to be a “partner”. Self-employment means exemption from some labour laws. Coops have been a cheap source of outsourcing for private firms, particularly to get around more combative permanently employed workers. Coops have also taken state contracts, displacing public sector unionised workers.

Thomas Purcell has argued convincingly that cooperatives and other experiments in the social economy “have func-

tioned as numerous and small-scale mechanisms that allow the government to quickly distribute a portion of Venezuela’s oil wealth (ground-rent) to previously marginalised social groups”. Venezuela’s cooperative experiment “has sanctioned the creation of cooperatives as a practically and ideologically expedient solution to the problem of distributing rent, which, in its present form, does not pose a challenge to rentier-capitalism other than by giving it another name and support base”.

As Marx pointed out in *Capital*, cooperatives do not offer a mode of life somehow untainted by capital, but “naturally reproduce in all cases, in their present organisation, all the defects of the existing system, and must reproduce them”.

Community councils

Since 2006, the Chávez government has promoted the proliferation of small neighbourhood bodies known as consejos comunales (community councils) representing between 200 and 400 families.

The government provides each one with about \$60,000 to undertake infrastructural and social projects. Around 30,000 consejos comunales have been formed, with many on the left arguing that they represented a new form of participatory democracy and showed the progressive nature of the administration.

By early 2010, several developments signalled the downplaying or phasing out of the community council programme. The Organic Law of Community Councils passed in December 2009 required the community councils to make a series of structural readjustments (a procedure referred to as “adecuación”) in order to retain their legal status.

As a result a large number of community councils failed to reaffirm their legal status within the 180-day limit established by the law.

For those consejos that survived and functioned, there are substantial criticisms. The community councils are financed by the state as a quasi-local government-network without any control over production. They do not have relationship with the labour movement, even with state-owned and co-managed factories.

The councils have been criticised for their failure to use unionised labour for public works projects. Like the earlier and also heralded Bolivarian Circles, these community councils represent the Bonapartist ethos of the “revolution”: an attempt to embed the state deep into civil society, to bypass potentially hostile local officials, and to administer patronage directly from the centre.

“Socialist Workers’ Councils”

The latest attempt to give the Bolivarian movement the veneer of radicalism are the so-called “Socialist Workers’ Councils”.

The Special Law for Socialist Workers’ Councils was orig-

inally presented to the National Assembly in 2007 by the Communist Party and was backed by Chávez. Although some councils were created, they only became legally recognised in December 2010.

Rachael Boothroyd, writing on the Venezuelanalysis website (27 July 2011) described the councils as “independent of unions” and “organisations of popular power that allow workers to participate in productive, administrative and management processes in their places of work... a legal mechanism through which the workers can play a ‘protagonistic role’ in dismantling ‘exploitative’ capitalist relations and advance the project of workers’ control”.

Chavista apologists such as Jorge Martín from the misnamed International Marxist Tendency (4 August 2011) claimed that “tens of thousands of such councils have been set up, on the initiative of workers from below, in factories, ministries and workplaces throughout the country”.

He claimed that many such workers’ councils have been set up in state-owned companies, institutions, foundations and ministries, where workers see them “more as a tool to fight against the state bureaucracy and for workers’ control”.

The irony of workers’ councils being set up by a bourgeois parliament and handed down to the workers seems to have been lost — indicating how far they are from genuine workers’ councils that are established as a dual power in the teeth of opposition from the existing state.

Martín admits that the councils have faced “extreme hostility and harassment on the part of ministers, vice-ministers and other state bureaucrats at all levels”.

Workers have been “sacked or harassed and persecuted, slandered, accused of counter-revolutionary activities “just for attempting to set them up in places like Mision Madres del Barrio (a social programme for mothers in poor neighbourhoods), at state-owned TV station Avila-TV, at the main state-owned channel VTV and even at the Ministry of Labour.

Another scandalous case is the harassment of promoters of the council at Fundacomunal, staffed by people coming from the Frente Francisco Miranda revolutionary youth organisation, and which is supposed to deal with the setting up of the communal councils.

Martín can at least perceive the Kafka-esque irony an institution designed to set up democratic community bodies persecuting its own staff, although he fails to draw the requisite conclusions about the nature of Chavismo.

PSUV

When the Chávez formed the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) after he won the presidential election in 2006, much of the left in Venezuela — including the nominally Trotskyist left — decided to join it.

Such tactical decisions should flow from an assessment of

Continued from page 13

the class nature of the party, something conspicuously absent from “entryists” such as Marea Socialista.

Sadly even critical thinkers on the international left also lost their bearings on this question. George Ciccariello-Maher argued in the *Historical Materialism* journal in 2011: “Internally, the PSUV is a battleground, a microcosm of the process as a whole. In other words, the fight needs to be brought to the PSUV, or it will become simply another corrupt patronage-machine. From the beginning, there have been popular victories and popular defeats within the PSUV, but it is too early to tell whether the battle is one that can be won. But by abandoning the battlefield altogether, it will certainly be lost.”

In his recent book, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, Ciccariello-Maher argues that the left “must attempt to grapple with the fact that the vast majority of such militants — those who deeply despise corruption, bureaucracy and even the state itself... are still Chavistas, at least for the time being”.

This is a miserable argument, which if it were followed would have meant the permanent subordination of the workers’ movement to bourgeois and other forces throughout history, since “the masses” and even “the militants” often do not start out on their own road.

In a world where bourgeois politics dominates, and the ruling ideas of the epoch are those of the ruling bourgeois class, simply accommodating to the existing level of consciousness of some workers means putting off indefinitely the process of independent working class political representation.

Like other aspects of Chavismo lauded by its international fellow-travellers, the PSUV is the product of Chávez’s Bonapartist project, a bourgeois party impervious to the democratic wishes of workers.

It is the ruling party of a ruling state bureaucracy with no real democratic mechanisms through which rank-and-file members can direct policy, little internal debate and no working class identity other than the fact that large numbers of individual workers have apparently joined it.

Several of the PSUV’s vice-presidents are ministers, while the governors and mayors promote their own slates in internal elections.

As Venezuelan activist Roland Denis put it: “The Party is an apparatus with neither logic nor political efficiency. It is totally lacking in ideological, organisational, and mobilisational coherence. The Party does not have the capacity to do anything. It is simply an electoral machine, in which there are internal battles for access to power within the bureaucratic-corporatist state...”

“A whole variety of formerly-autonomous social spaces, at the levels of workers, the peasantry, and so on, have become subsumed within the Party. Between 2004 and today, the consolidation of this bureaucratic corporatist state has advanced forcefully, in no small part as a consequence of the PSUV.”

The Bonapartist nature of the party is summed up by the role of Diosdado Cabello, the head of the National Assembly, a former military officer who participated in the 1992 coup attempt with Chávez.

In November 2008, Cabello lost the election for governor of Miranda state. He was so unpopular with PSUV members that he was not even elected to its leadership. But Chávez appointed him a vice president of the party. In October 2012 Cabello (still vice-president of the PSUV) announced to the media the party’s candidates for governor in the upcoming election who had been selected by the method of “cooptation”, much like the Catholic Church chooses its popes.

Equality

Another measure of the limits of Chávez’s Bolivarian vision is the limited impact on fighting oppression and domination in Venezuelan society.

The Chavistas argue that women are strongly involved in the missions in the barrios and that the opposition uses extreme racist, sexist and homophobic language and imagery in its publications, which is true. However so do pro-Chávez publications.

In the *Historical Materialism* discussion, Sujatha Fernandez highlighted caricatures of former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the pro-Chávez dailies, ridiculing her African features. She also pointed to the recall referendum-campaign in 2004, when “the pro-Chávez side would use highly sexualised portraits of women in bikinis to promote their cause.

New president Nicolás Maduro

“There was even one picture of a very overweight woman in a g-string that represented the opposition, as compared to a petite woman as Chavista”.

Fernandez argues that these sexualised and racialised images are part of a broader culture in Venezuela where homophobia, racism and sexism are strong.

In the same publication, Roland Denis argued that in Venezuela, “the women’s movement does not exist”. Although there is are feminist currents with journals and magazines that make important theoretical interventions, he says “there is nothing that constitutes a movement, that recognises itself as such, and that is conscious of the historic oppression of women. There is nothing approaching a popular women’s movement”. Denis was a member of the National Assembly in the early 2000s. He recalled the attempt to introduce a law legalising abortion, which was struck down — including by the vast majority of the Chavista women in the assembly. He believes that “it is impossible to pass such a law in the contemporary Venezuelan context”. Similarly, “homophobia in Venezuela is extreme” and “open violence against transgendered people continues unabated”.

It is evident that for the rhetoric, the Bolivarian revolution has not seen the qualitative leap forward on equality that followed for example the Russian revolution, or even the period after 1968.

Internationalism?

Chávez became famous across the globe for his attacks on George Bush, and his “smell of sulphur” speech was a spectacular piece of political theatre.

Chávez’s anti-American rhetoric was undoubtedly fuelled by US government interference in the Venezuela, including backing for the opposition coup, the lock-out and various NGOs. However Chávez did not tear up the longstanding economic ties between the two states.

In truth, Chávez was not a consistent anti-imperialist, indeed he was no anti-imperialist at all, unless the term is mangled to mean only opposition to the US. Chávez did more than make allies with despots, he made friends with some of the other big imperialist and sub-imperialist powers across the globe, providing them with political cover, material aid and commercial trade.

According to the *Financial Times* (7 March 2013) after Washington imposed a weapons embargo on Venezuela in 2006, Chávez stepped up orders for Russian arms. Russia has supplied about \$5bn worth of armaments to Venezuela and has orders for about the same amount again.

Similarly, the *Financial Times* (8 March 2013) claims that the state-owned China Development Bank has agreed to lend Venezuela \$32.5bn since 2008, or around half the loans the country received during that period. Almost all these loans are backed by sales contracts for crude oil — apparently around 300,000 barrels a day.

Shipments of oil to China by PDVSA have increased nearly ten times since 2006 and the country now sells around 19% of its oil output to China, which has become Venezuela’s second biggest trading partner after the US. From Beijing’s perspective, Venezuela is now its seventh-biggest supplier of oil.

Even Chávez’s pan-Latin American appeals were really much more about buying influence with oil revenue than international solidarity. The proliferation of aid masked deals with Caribbean countries, with Bolivia, Argentina and above all Cuba that use oil-rents to procure political support. Chávez propped up the decrepit Castro regime in Cuba to the tune of \$7bn a year, in return for Cuban military, political and technical support.

This gave the Castro brothers a breathing space, keeping the country in their iron grip, which barely allows the freedom to use the internet, never mind the freedom to organise, to publish and to form a genuine workers’ movement independent of the state.

Chávez made grotesque apologies for Mugabe, Qaddafi, Assad and other despots. The perversity of expressing support for the reactionary Iranian president Ahmadinejad was not lost on Iranian car workers or the countless others suffering oppression in Iran. It epitomised the anti-working class essence of Chávez’s international diplomacy. In 2009 Chávez was lauded by much of the left after he called for the forming a Fifth International.

These efforts were stillborn after it became clear that participants would include the governing Peronist party in Argentina, the misnamed Communist Party of China and Mugabe’s Zanu-PF. Such a conglomeration is about as far from a workers’ international or even a force for democracy as it is possible to conceive. Chávez excelled at absconding with the language of the left and using it for his own purposes. The truly sad thing about much of the left is the manner in which it fell for rhetoric, instead of looking at the reality.

Where is Venezuela going under Maduro?

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

Maduro won 50.7% of the vote against right-wing neoliberal opposition candidate Henrique Capriles, who got 49.1%. Chavista cheerleaders such as the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign were saying only days before the result that Maduro had a double digit lead over Capriles. Turnout was still high at 78%. There can be few excuses.

Chávez defeated Capriles 55%-44% in October 2012 and his PSUV trounced them in 20 of 23 state governor races in December 2012. 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 apparatus behind him. Yet he scrapped home by the narrowest of margins.

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. In March, Maduro made a speech hours before announcing his Chávez’s death, in which he spoke as the head of a “political-military revolutionary command”.

He was flanked by the cabinet, Chavistas state governors and senior military leaders. Rafael Ramírez, head of PDVSA was in charge of voter mobilisation for the Maduro campaign. The defence minister, Admiral Diego Molero Belavia said the mission of the armed forces was to “put Maduro in the presidency”. But there is rivalry between Maduro (representing the civic side) and Diosdado Cabello, representing the military wing.

Chavismo has sunk deep roots into Venezuelan society and is unlikely to be ejected swiftly. As long as the oil money funds the social programmes, the Chavistas will retain a wide base of support. They have probably overcome the worst of the recent economic downturn — though of course further external shocks could upset their plans and they have to come to terms with immediate shortages as well as long term structural problems with the Venezuelan economy. The Chavistas are likely to seek to accommodate sections of the opposition — or at least placate some of its supporters.

However Chavismo as a project is over. Chavismo is likely to decompose into either a more orthodox bourgeois force or a rather meaner military one. The job of Marxists remains unflinching criticism of Chavismo, as the prerequisite for the re-emergence of organised labour as a factor in Venezuelan politics.

Cleansing the international left of illusions in Chávez is part of that task. Without such decontamination, the road to working class self-emancipation will remain blocked.

RMT to fight 12.5% budget cut

By Ollie Moore

The Rail, Maritime, and Transport workers union (RMT) is planning a London-wide labour movement and community campaign against a 12.5% cut in central government funding to Transport for London, announced in George Osborne's June spending review.

A policy passed by the union's General Grades Committee said: "We are already seeing attempts to make cuts — for example, London Underground ticket office closures, the removal of guards on London Overground, the sale of significant Transport for London property, and funding cuts to the LT Museum.

"This further savage cut will see transport services pared, fares rise, improvement works scrapped, safety standards compromised, and the capital's

transport infrastructure deteriorate. It will bring about attacks on working conditions and jobs, at a time when London needs more employment opportunities, not fewer. It will be working-class communities, and those who should be able to rely on public transport — such as elderly and disabled people and those who can not afford private transport — who will lose out the most."

It plans a demonstration on 8 October, when Parliament reopens, and to promote a "Workers' and Passengers' Plan" as a positive alternative to cuts.

Under the pressure of

cuts, London Overground has already announced a plan to cut 130 guards' jobs and move to "Driver Only Operation" on its trains.

RMT began ballots of its guard members for strikes and action short of strikes on 31 July, with the ballots due to close on 15 August.

A union statement said: "The fight to defend 130 safety-critical guards' jobs on London Overground will be centre stage in RMT's overall battle to defend jobs and safety on London's transport services. RMT recognises that this lethal proposals has been brought about as result of the 12.5% cut in TfL

funding announced in George Osborne's Comprehensive Spending Review. RMT has made it crystal clear that those cuts will be resisted by this union with all means at our disposal, including industrial action.

"The news that millions of passengers are to be put at risk through plans to throw the guards off London Overground trains on north London routes has already sent shockwaves through transport services and is clearly a foretaste of what is to come.

"We can expect many more of these attacks on jobs and safety as TFL slash hundreds of millions from their budget at Government behest. They will be met with the fiercest possible resistance from RMT as we link up the groups of workers in the firing line."

Tubeworker and *Off The Rails*, Workers' Liberty industrial bulletins for London Underground and mainline railway workers respectively, have pro-

duced a special joint bulletin for the dispute. It argues: "As workers, withdrawing our labour is the most powerful weapon we have to stop our bosses from doing things which will harm workers' livelihoods and passengers' safety.

"The union position in this dispute should be non-negotiable: not one single cut. Management have already tried to shift the goalposts by drawing distinctions between compulsory and voluntary redundancies. *Tubeworker* and *Off The Rails* believe that job cuts have to be opposed, however management tries to make them.

"RMT members on London Overground should convene a strike committee to oversee the dispute and decide what tactics and strategies are necessary to beat the bosses."

• Download the bulletin: bit.ly/tw-otr

East Midlands Trains action has impact

By an East Midlands Trains driver

From 20 July, on-train and platform staff working for East Midlands Trains. have refused to work rest days and overtime and are working to rule. This has caused numerous train delays and cancellations, particularly on Sunday 28 July.

The two to one result in the ballot for action short of strike is a welcome reversal of previous failures to respond to management attacks.

The dispute is due to a breakdown in industrial relations which covers several issues. One of these was rostering during the shutdown of Nottingham station for five weeks worth of long-planned engineering work.

A few days before the start of the work, bosses tried to impose an emergency roster on a lot of staff, claiming it was part of their T&Cs. It isn't: but maintaining that position is a desperate attempt to cover up EMT's woeful negligence in not making any serious effort to come to a similar arrangement with these staff like they did months before with train drivers (who are now working normally).

Going on past history, management must have thought they could ignore everybody else. Imagine their surprise when they heard the ballot result!

• For more on East Midlands, see the latest issue of *Off The Rails*: workersliberty.org/offthetrails

US fast food workers strike again

American cities were hit by another wave of fast food workers' strikes on 29 July.

Employees at McDonalds, Wendy's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, and other chains continued their fight for a \$15 per hour minimum wage.

Most fast food workers currently earn around half that amount, which they say is nowhere near enough to live on.

The campaign has already involved several strikes, as well as community protests.

One million on zero hours

By Jonny West

New surveys have revealed that the number of workers on "zero-hours" contracts (that is, who work as and when their employer tells them to, rather than for a set number of hours each week) could be as high as one million.

The Office of National Statistics puts the figure at 250,000 for 2012 — an increase of 50,000 from the previous year's statistics — but the Chartered Institute

of Personnel and Development says that its survey of 1,000, if projected across the whole country, suggests a figure four times that amount.

McDonalds, which first introduced zero-hours contracts in 1974, says that 90% of its UK staff have no fixed hours.

Unite has launched a campaign against zero-hours contracts. Other unions, like the University and College Union (UCU), have existing campaigns against the practice in their particular industries.

Housing workers strike

150 workers at One Housing Group struck from 24 July to 26 July in a bid to stop pay cuts of up to £8,000.

• More: bit.ly/ohg-strike

Johnson to force through fire cuts

By Darren Bedford

London Mayor Boris Johnson has overruled the city's Fire Authority to force through potentially devastating cuts to the capital's fire service.

10 stations, 14 engines, and 552 jobs will go as part of a cuts plan aimed at saving nearly £30 million. Johnson is making the cuts unilaterally, despite the Authority having voted against them.

94% of respondents to the public consultation around the cuts opposed them, with hundreds attending local meetings and demonstrations. Around 1,000 firefighters and supporters marched on 18 July to demand the cuts plan be shelved.

The Fire Brigades Union

(FBU) has called the cuts "an affront to democracy".

Ian Lehair, FBU Executive member for London, said: "The cuts are dangerous and wrong, and this is devastating news for Londoners, with lives across the capital being put at risk by the mayor's reckless cuts.

"[Boris] Johnson has simply ignored the evidence, and his cuts will mean slower response times for four million Londoners."

The FBU is also gearing up for national strikes on attacks to firefighters' pension provision. A strike ballot began on 18 July, and runs until 29 August.

Several local Fire Authorities have caused controversy by announcing schemes to train volunteers to provide fire cover in event of a strike. Qualified firefighters have 12 weeks' training, but strike-breaking volunteers may get less than three weeks before being sent out to tackle blazes.

FBU officials have slammed the plan as "absolutely crazy".

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

Local strikes map the way for postal workers

110 Royal Mail workers at Bridgwater Delivery Office in Somerset are in dispute with their local management over issues including management bullying and breaking agreements. The official dispute has already included five days of strikes.

A national conference of CWU postal workers reps has voted to call a national ballot for strikes against the privatisation of Royal Mail, no later than September 2013.

Dave Chapple is the Communication Workers Union (CWU) shop steward in Bridgwater, Branch Chair of Bristol and District CWU, and an editor of *Trade Union Solidarity* magazine.

Dave spoke to *Solidarity* to give his personal views on the local and national disputes.

Royal Mail is digging in locally. We had a dozen scabs being picked up at a secret rendezvous and bussed in through picket lines in the back of a blacked-out transit van: pathetic!

For the bosses, the dispute is now quite clearly about breaking the CWU in Bridgwater. That's why financial support is crucial.

We're upping the ante too: we've asked for 10 further strike days, which is a doubling of the length of action we've taken previously. We'll strike from Saturday 10 to Monday 12 August, then Saturday 17 to Monday 19 August, then six days in September starting Monday 2nd. It's the longest local official CWU dispute in many years.

Fundraising has had a huge impact on morale. We've raised £23,000 in two weeks, including £15,000 from our own branch, Bristol and District Amalgamated. There was a great bucket collection of £1,400 at the union's two-day reps' conference on 31 July and 1 August.

Every Bridgwater striker has had a payout of £100, and it's a huge boost to morale to see the notice board at work plastered with messages of support.

Our last pub meeting on Sunday 4 August had 75 workers attending. We voted for the next 10 days of strikes, with only one opposing, so we are still very strong.

Bullying and harassment by just about all our Bridgwater managers continues to be a massive issue and one that connects our dispute with so many other workplaces within and without Royal Mail. We feel we are taking a lead and making a stand.

It's becoming symbolic for the situation nationally, because Bridgwater is the workplace leading the fightback against the issues that are faced across the country. It's spreading in the west of England – there are strikes due at our branch delivery offices in Fishponds and Weston-super-Mare on Saturday 10 and Saturday 17 August, with seven workplaces in and around Plymouth also balloting for strikes, as well as the whole of Cornwall, which has historically been a weaker area.

The disputes are about filling in the gaps between

a political struggle against Royal Mail privatisation and struggles at workplace level on issues like management bullying and harassment, which will inevitably increase if privatisation goes through.

NATIONAL STRIKE
The union leadership is pushing a national strike, probably for mid-September, and the reps' conference unanimously endorsed that idea.

Building and spreading local disputes is a key part of the build up to that, and the stewards, officers, and activists involved in those disputes need to organise together to provide the backbone for a national strike.

Most national disputes we've had over the past 30 years have ended, in my personal opinion, in sell outs or shoddy and unnecessary compromises, so that coordination of militant branches, and militant stewards from weaker branches might be an essential counterweight to the national leaders in any national strike.

The campaign against privatisation has to have a working-class focus. The idea of working with Tories, the Countryside Alliance or Ukip is mistaken.

There is, however, a real "countryside factor", in that middle-class people in villages can be won round to supporting even unofficial industrial action out of sympathy for what Royal Mail represents for them, but those alliances have to be formed around a national strike, not by linking up with Tory councillors or Ukip.

The union is in my view neglecting some basic groundwork for the campaign in the labour movement. I'm the Bridgwater Trades Union Council secretary, and we've not received a single leaflet or piece of correspondence from the CWU nationally promoting the campaign.

The political culture in the union is at a very low level: this is partly because political education and political committees solely concern themselves with Labour Party matters. Nationally, tiny concessions from the Labour Party are hailed as triumphs. There's no political education, and the union leadership effectively has a monopoly on politics within the union. They command a level of trust and confidence that they don't deserve.

There's a lot to play for right now! Bridgwater is very much leading the way at the moment.

Our strike, and other local struggles, can be built on and connected to galvanise the national dispute.

- Financial solidarity with the Bridgwater strike is vitally important. Please make cheques out to: "Bridgwater Trades Union Council" and send to: Dave Chapple, 1 Blake Place, Bridgwater, Somerset, TA6 5AU. To contact Dave directly with messages of support, ring 0777 6304 276 or email davechapple@btinternet.com.

- This interview is abridged from a longer version, which appears online at bit.ly/bridgwater

Egypt nears tipping point

By Gerry Bates

Five weeks after the 3 July coup, Egypt looks near another tipping point.

On 3 July the army, following huge protests against Egypt's Islamist president Mohammed Morsi, ousted the Islamist government and installed a new administration of its choice.

The Brotherhood has chosen not to steer towards civil war as Algeria's Islamists did when that country's army cancelled elections in 1992 to stop the Islamists winning. But it is keeping up mass street protests.

Dozens of Brotherhood protesters were killed soon after the coup, but the Islamists remain undaunted. The army threatens to clear the protests by whatever means necessary, but hesitates at the bloodbath necessary to do that.

On 5 August the *Guardian* reported that: "Egypt's military leaders are understood to have offered to include the Muslim Brotherhood in a political process that gives the vanquished movement three ministerial posts in a unity government and frees some members from prison. [Six Brotherhood officials, including two top leaders, are due to be brought to court on 25 August on charges of murder and incitement]... However, the Egyptian military and the presidency later denied that talks had taken place".

US and EU envoys are trying to cook up a compromise.

The army leaders and the government they installed still enjoy political credit from the backlash against the regime of the Muslim Brotherhood, a (cautious) clerical-fascist movement which tightened repression, squeezed workers' rights, and failed

to offer Egypt's poor (13% official unemployment, 30% among youth) any relief during its year in power.

The army is trying to coopt the left. Kamal Abu Eita, who was leader of the Real Estate and Tax Authority Employees' Union (one of the most important independent trade unions under Mubarak) and president of the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, has been made Minister of Manpower.

Nabil Fahmy, the interim foreign minister, has reversed the policy announced by the Brotherhood government shortly before its downfall, of active support for Sunni-Islamist opposition militias in Syria. "I can tell you frankly from now on that there is no intention for jihad in Syria" (FT 21 July).

But the new government has reinstated the old regime's political and religious police units, disbanded in March 2011.

On 5 July it closed the Rafah crossing which connects Gaza to the outside world. It has since reopened it, four hours a day in place of the previous nine. The economic impact in Gaza is heavy.

According to *Die Zeit* (17 July), the 3 July coup was followed by a leap in prices on the Cairo stock exchange, and the return to Egypt, with their money, of many Egyptian plutocrats who had stayed abroad under the Morsi regime. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have sent billions in aid.

The decisive question remains: will Egypt's new workers' movement be able to use this period of flux and relative openness to build itself and assert itself as an independent political force, against the Islamists, the army, and the plutocrats.

The pro-Morsi demonstrations continue