

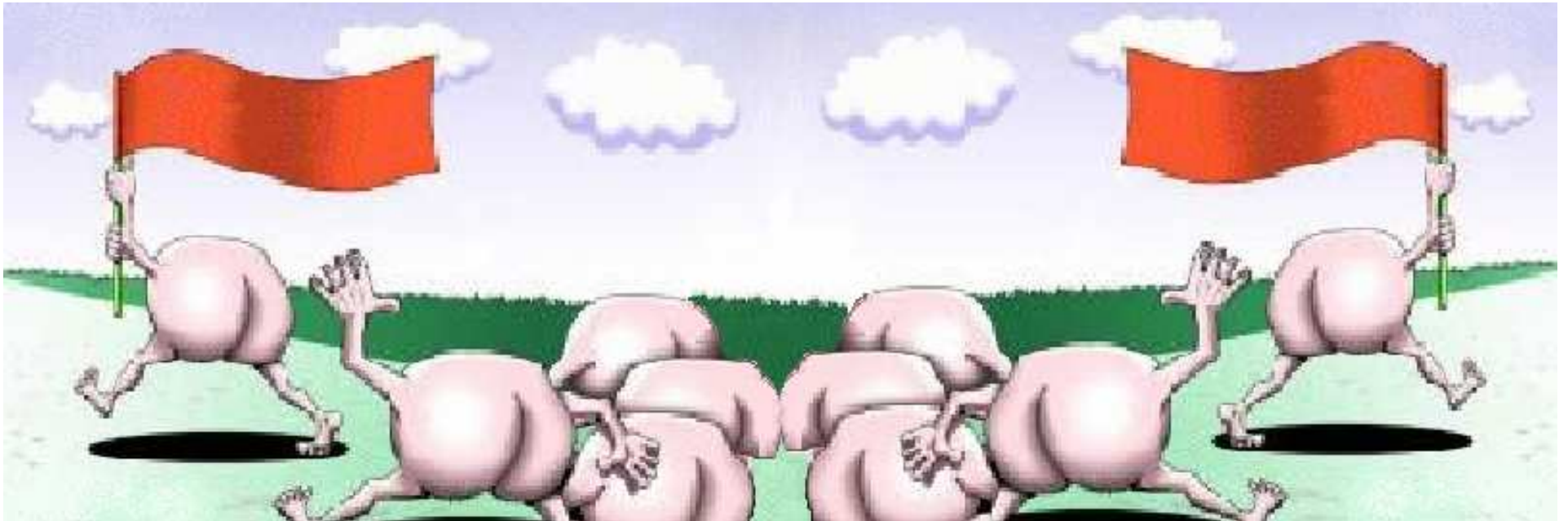
# the ★ commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below

January 2009

## crisis of working-class political representation conference

after twelve years of New Labour we are no nearer an alternative and the traditional left still hate each other more than the ruling class ...



# how can we break this deadlock?

**The crisis of working class representation is more acute and its resolution more urgent than ever.** As we sink further into recession the labour movement should be going on the offensive, but we do not have an effective trade union movement or political party which can stand up and fight for workers' interests. Instead the British establishment can consider its options unhindered by any threat to their plans from the force with the capacity to realise an alternative – the working class.

With big defeats for the labour movement and transformations in the Labour Party we have seen our class largely removed from the terrain of political life. At present organised capital does not need to consider too much the reaction of organised labour. The TUC - which is supposed to represent the organised workers - is run by careerist bureaucrats only concerned with themselves. With a few exceptions, the entrenched hierarchy of the ever more bureaucratized unions have accepted their subservient position, confining their activities to those permitted within the anti-union laws. This sorry bunch continues to bank-roll New Labour whilst holding back any acts which may jeopardise Brown's position.

The vast majority of the rank and file of the labour movement are sick of New Labour, far from considering it 'our party' or 'our government', it is detested. In the twelve years of this government, the organisation of workers' representation and a more combative trade unionism has been a more realistic prospect than for years. Yet despite a reservoir of support the efforts to realise this potential have been a failure. On the traditional left there have been two major contending responses:

### Socialist sectarianism

Electoral based initiatives from the SLP to Respect have failed to establish a viable working class voice in politics. They have gathered few forces beyond the ranks of their

founding organisations, and have not convinced significant sections of the movement of the viability of their projects. They have not arisen organically from actual working class struggles, but have been set up and counterposed to the movement in a sectarian manner, expecting the working class to follow. Despite the merit of some of their goals, such initiatives have been a still birth.

### Labourite socialism in denial

Labourite socialism has proved unable to rally sufficient forces to halt the transformation in the Labour Party, even when left policy successes were achieved, they are unable to ensure their implementation. This position has grown steadily worse with the haemorrhaging of membership. The Labourite left in the union hierarchy proved impotent by betraying decisions to back John McDonnell for leader. *Tribune* and the Socialist Campaign Group who acquiesced in Brown's coronation, are in a state of rigor mortis. The ever decreasing circles of Labourite socialists who recognise the need for a new beginning are frozen, stuck in a crisis of confidence. They may denounce failed independent initiatives but have no alternative themselves.

Three years after the RMT's previous conference on workers' representation **we are no further forward!** Various efforts to resolve this crisis are in a log-jam. The Labourites' socialism lacks any confidence and the prospects for external socialists seem equally dismal. Decades of defeat has left us a legacy where fragmentation and sectarianism has grown worse. Many despair at how **socialists seem to hate each other more than the ruling class.** Whilst the *Convention of the Left* was a step forward in terms of space for debate, it did not address the crisis of representation or unity because it was considered too "divisive" to be discussed.

There is always the possibility this crisis of representation

could be solved spontaneously, with new form of organisation arising from struggles - but this not enough. Ideas don't drop from the skies - they flow from human activity. We have a responsibility to take action ourselves to forge the movement we need. But we cannot carry on in the same old way; we need to overcome the habitual sectism and union indifferentism to politics. Activists attending today's event should recognise that this situation can be reversed. We have had unity before to secure workers' representation, from the Chartist movement in the 19th century to the first Labour Representation Committee, and initial Communist Party of Great Britain in the early 20th century. This did not involve all working class activists, but it did involve pioneers taking courageous steps to make a new beginning.

A key which could break this log-jam is the more independent and radical trade unions. An organisational initiative by them could instil new confidence amongst the thousands of demoralised and fragmented activists; and subdue the damaging sectarianism. A new, democratic and pluralistic body arising organically from the labour movement would be of a different character to previous efforts. It could electrify working class politics. But left wing union leaders so far have been unwilling to take the lead in developing a new initiative. Some are cautious and argue they are trade unionists first and foremost and could not carry the support of their members. But did not the predecessor of the RMT take the initiative to help found the original LRC? Is not the PCS leadership and machinery run by the (Trotskyist) Socialist Party? If the leaders will not fight for it, the rank and file will have to do it without them. The RMT, NUJ, PCS and FBU have formed a co-ordinating group "to ensure that "trade unionists are given a new and stronger coordinated political voice." These sentiments along with RMT conference policy to set up local workers' representation committees - as opposed to a Labour Party Mark II - point to a way out of this malaise. But we can't wait another three years—we need to make a start now.

# the labour movement we need

As the storm in the global economy continues to rage we face a stark contradiction: the inadequacy of capitalism is glaringly apparent yet there is a lack of confidence in the viability of creating an alternative society, and the absence of a labour movement with the strength to make it happen.

After three decades the movement is still working through the consequences of the defeat it suffered during the bosses' offensive which began around 1975 and continued under Thatcher. Both the ruling class and the working class have amassed in this period a whole new historical experience, but it has been organised capital, not organised labour, which has displayed greater ability to learn, carry out renewal and restructuring to preserve its position.

The labour movement has gone through a transformative process but not to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - instead the labour bureaucracy has been largely successful in ensuring the submission of the movement to forces diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class.

During the long retreat the influence of the traditional left has declined, left unity initiatives often no more than the latest efforts at sectarian self-perpetuation, theoretical renewal retarded by the self-imposed parameters which safeguard the hallowed conceptions. The actual lack of influence often goes un-noticed by the many self-appointed repositories of so much revolutionary rust. Some are consoled by a millenarian belief that their weakness is only temporary; the crisis of capital will bring their day. Yet as opposed to the collapse of capitalism it has been large sections of the left that collapsed.

As we sink further into recession it is not so much that the labour movement is at a crossroads, but that an historical phase has run its course. With it those models of socialism which dominated the 20th century have proven their failure - Stalinist style 'Communism' has declined and Labour Party style social-democracy has nothing to offer beyond the present system of austerity and crisis.

## Labourism - an historic failure

Part of the explanation for the derailment of the labour movement can be traced to when the working class initially gained access to Parliament. On achieving this, a division arose between the "political arm" and an "industrial arm". It was thought that the "political arm" - which cohered into the Labour Party - would legislate in the interests of workers; but it turned out to be the other way round. There was no golden age which some socialists wish to see the Labour Party to return. It was largely the political reflex of leaders, who accepted the ideas of moderate trade unionism, the spirit of conciliation and compromise, translated into middle-class Parliamentary activity. Instead of strengthening the fighting force of organised labour in its struggles, the 'political arm' confined the unions to legally restricted 'trade disputes'. What was supposed to be the 'political voice of labour', engaged in 'gradual change' was very soon imposing capital's interests.

This was not pre-determined: the constant pressure of workers struggles on the capitalist system saw capital re-



spond through the inducement of a section of the working class. But it wasn't only these "labour lieutenants of capital" who were to blame, but the whole strategy of reformist labourism based on the self-defeating ideas of Parliamentary socialism. The belief not only that we can gain reforms to improve the conditions of the working class, but that by means of legislation capitalism can be abolished. The concept of a Parliamentary road to socialism reduced the movement outside of Parliament to a subsidiary role.

This elitist strategy is intimately connected to the state-socialist conceptions which have long permeated the labour movement - the erroneous view that equates state control of the economy with socialism and whose Stalinist and social-democratic experiments have led to historic failures as regards creating a socialist society.

For those who only look for small changes, reformism may seem an effective strategy, but it is **self-defeating**. One generation of Parliamentary socialism has seen post-war reforms erected only to be dismantled by another generation. In its New Labour phase, labourism has been further removed from the ideas of socialism than at any time in history, but the strategy has been no more effective. It has never been Parliamentary socialism which controlled capital but capital that controlled Parliamentary socialism for the benefit of itself.

Communists do not advocate abstention from the use of existing democratic channels as a platform for our ideas, but recognise they are neither the only means available nor any sort of end in themselves. The myth of the Parliamentary road permeates our movement so much that the entire debate on the crisis of working class representation is restricted within the parameters of creating some form of electoral body - either by reclaiming the existing Labour Party or creation of a new Labour Party Mark II. **These are false opposites: neither of these options involves learning from the mistakes of the past methods of organising our movement and entirely changed historical context.**

The model of reformist labourism may have appeared sustainable during the expansionary phase of capital, when demands within certain limits could be reconciled with, and contained within the system. But with the huge developments in capitalism beginning in the 1970s the rug was pulled from under labourism, social-democratic reformism steadily realigned itself into the neo-liberal bloc with a parallel effort to re-shape the unions.

If we really wish to transform society, and if we see that as the purpose of our activity, then we require a radical process of re-composition of the entire labour movement into one capable of taking offensive action. This requires far more than a change of personnel, new leaders or a more determined "awkward squad": the entire organisational structures and ideas need revolutionising. In re-forging our labour movement we have to break from failed conceptions of the past such as building a new body based on the bureaucracy of the movement, we need a movement accountable to its rank and file members not politicians and managers. They need to be captured, transformed and restructured by the rank and file. If there is no prospect of reforming the suffocating bureaucratised unions, then we need to consider creating a new body with those prepared to truly defend the interests of labour.

We need to make a start by recognising that workplace organization and union membership needs to be re-built. If the officials will not fight then we need to take control, to combine and gain the confidence to act independently. The familiar methods of the 'broad lefts', of machine politics and intrigue rather than rank and file action have had their day.

It is astounding how little discussion there is about an alternative society to capitalism today. We often hear the refrain that we ought to concern ourselves with the 'day-to-day-issues' since we can't write blueprints. But there is no 'movement' unless it is towards something, and without a clear goal of a new society the labour movement will continually be reconciled to the existing society.

After a century of failed, defeated, self-limiting and unfinished revolutions, of counterfeit alternatives, from the totalitarian 'communism' of the ex-USSR to sweatshop 'communism' of China, to the failure of 'welfare state' capitalism of the Labour Party - this is a task of redoubled importance.

Talk of communist revolution and transformation of society may seem very utopian in today's climate, but we should not forget that virtually no-one predicted the explosion of workers' struggles that occurred at the end of the 1960s. Although at present people lack confidence in real social change, they are still far less subservient than previous generations. The present anger about redundancies, cost of living, welfare reforms and war indicates considerable potential for the future, but not without substantial rethinking of our tactics and what society we want to create instead.

## Uncaptive Minds

### Forum on "resisting the recession"

How do we fight back against mass redundancies? What should the workers' movement do about the rising cost of living?

Speakers include **Steve Hedley** (RMT London Transport Regional Organiser); **Christine Hulme** (PCS activist in Department for Work and Pensions); **Chris Ford** (The Commune; LRC NC) and **Gregor Gall** (Professor of Industrial Relations, Hertfordshire University). **Lucas Arms, near King's Cross, from 7pm on Monday January 26th.**

## the★commune

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

We are internationalists: we seek the greatest possible collaboration with communists in other countries; we build solidarity with workers' movements around the world; we are opposed to all borders and immigration controls; and we unconditionally support the right of nations to self-determination.

We know that communism can only come from below, through the organisations of the workers themselves. This conception of communism has nothing in common with the fake "socialisms" of the Stalinist state planning of the former USSR, of the sweatshops of China, and social-democratic "humane" capitalism. No nation in the world today is communist, nowhere is the economy managed by the workers. These models of "socialism" have all proven to be complete failures, maintaining and in many cases aggravating the working class's lack of self-determination. There is no particular connection between socialism and nationalisation by the state, which merely replaces one set of managers with another; alongside fighting day-to-day battles we advocate a struggle for vestiges of workers' control in the here and now as preparatory steps towards real workers' self-management and collective ownership.

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

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

We have no gods, not even revolutionary ones. We reject the practice of using the works of this or that socialist of decades past as sacred texts from which "revealed truths" can be read off as gospel. The "traditions" to which the traditional left groups appeal are universally ahistorical and anachronistic, used for the sake of feigning historical legitimacy rather than to critically examine and draw lessons from the past.

We believe that the defeats of the workers' movement in the last three decades; the decay of the left and the absolute poverty of its ideas and slogans; its abandonment of class politics; and the sectarianism of the groups vying for supremacy with their own front campaigns and so-called unity projects; are all evidence of the need for ground-up rethinking of the left's project and the re-composition of the workers' movement.

*For more information on our group, its meetings and its publications, email [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com)*

*Send correspondence, donations and other publications to The Commune, 2nd Floor, 145-157 St John Street, London EC1V 4PY.*

# thecommmune.co.uk