

‘fred the shred’ is just a scapegoat!

fight the ruling class and its state, not just ‘bankers’ or ‘fat cats’

The New Labour minister Ed Balls has described the current downturn as the greatest crisis of capitalism “for over a hundred years”, and wage-freezes and mass-lay-offs are biting hard. Unemployment has now surpassed two million, February seeing a further 138,000 people forced onto the dole as a result of the biggest jobs cull since 1971.

The supposedly all-powerful market, whose authority ‘could not’ be challenged, is laid bare, as a fraud: the emperor has no clothes. The corporate press now openly mocks the free-marketeer ideology which was so central to the ruling class’s discourse only a couple of years ago. Presidents and prime ministers, too, say they are breaking with the ‘old ways’ of neo-liberalism: Gordon Brown even told the European Parliament on Tuesday 24th March:

“The problem of unbridled free markets in an unsupervised market place is that they can reduce all relationships to transactions, all motivations to self-interest, all sense of value to consumer choice and all sense of worth to a price tag.”

With such a retreat on the part of our rulers, the left is presented with an open goal to argue that another type of society—a communist order, a democratic, collective, self-managed society without states, markets or exploitation—is both possible and desirable.

And yet most of the slogans and placards at today’s demo will not be arguing against capitalism, still less doing anything to build a movement which could overthrow it. In fact, the current ‘common sense’ on the radical left is about the same as the ideas put about in the *Guardian* or *Independent*: promoting the idea that the bankers are ‘greedy’ and Gordon Brown should punish them; and arguing for more state intervention in the economy. They do not argue against capitalism *as such* or put forward a different vision of society, but merely a more statist version of the same system.

But the bank take-overs which have already happened make it quite obvious what a dead end nationalisation is: the ruling class’s state acts as a guarantor of private capitalists in times of trouble, not as some neutral arbiter of the interests of society as a whole. To those who argue that the state has taken ownership of the banks, but it really ought to demand control of them, we can only ask: would it really be so much better if Lord Peter Mandelson had more of a say?

Many of the currently-popular slogans in fact serve as little but ‘left’ cover for those in government and the ruling class who



if this ‘greedy’ banker didn’t exist, the ruling class would have to invent him...

seek to blame ‘financiers’ and the insufficiently ‘prudent’ for the current economic crisis, in order to divert attention from the real problem: capitalism itself. Their fight is for more state ‘regulation’ precisely with the objective of defending the existing order: steadying the ship of the regime of class exploitation which leaves most of us forced to do alienating work and burdened with shit housing and public services.

That is why there was little outcry in the corporate media when, this week, a group of activists calling themselves “Bank Bosses are Criminals” smashed a few of the windows of the home and car of “Fred the Shred”, the ex-Royal Bank of Scotland chief Sir Fred Goodwin. *The Times* report, for example, largely consisted of quotes from (no doubt also wealthy) neighbours of the pensioner/magnate, which displayed a fair degree of sympathy for the action. It is indeed a scandal that we live in a such a social order where someone like “Sir Fred” is so vastly wealthy—but what kind of blow against this capitalist system would it be if Harriet Harman *did* manage to get the RBS pensions reined in, the ruling class’s state slightly hemming in the worst excesses of an individual as a fake ‘socially aware’ posture? The apparently ‘radical’ gesture of breaking the windows of “Sir Fred” the individual is pretty much the other side of the same coin as the demands for state intervention in the economy.

A far more pressing task is to build a movement which could take a punch at capitalism itself.

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so what happens after the demo?

(<<< **continued**) That is not the movement we have now. As yesterday's *Times* points out, the Put People First march organised by the Trades Union Congress and various NGOs hardly has the establishment quaking in their boots "Anti-capitalism having gone mainstream, this march hopes to be its unobjectionable face, and their demands are moderate enough that most Labour ministers will sign up". Nor will the windows broken in this week's more riotous events be too sorely missed by the ruling class, no more than when the dust had settled after May Day 2000. When this week is over, we will still be wanting for any serious level of organisation.

The crisis of capitalism does not necessarily mean that millions will rise up in anger, and attacks by the ruling class will not necessarily be met with effective resistance, which is possible. For example the RMT, the best-organised and most militant union in Britain, is currently mounting strong resistance to the onslaught by London's Tory Mayor Boris Johnson—an attempt to crush its power—and yet its national leadership is ploughing resources into a dismal European election campaign "No2EU" with protectionist, nationalist slogans unconnected to its concrete—meaningful—industrial battle.

We ought not look for substitutes to the patient work of building a real workers' movement: rather, we should support and spread those struggles which do break out, as a means of developing a class fight. We might take as examples the cleaners' strikes in the City of London by migrant workers, the Lindsey wildcat action and the factory occupations in Dundee and Waterford.

But when we look at the list of trade unions behind today's rally, we might ask ourselves: where were they last month when thousands of workers across Britain's oil refineries were mounting the biggest wildcat strike in decades? When Lindsey workers hit by the recession really were collectively organising to resist the jobs cull, what was labour movement officialdom doing to spread the action, or to recreate solidarity actions such as that staged by six hundred Polish workers at the Langage power station near Plymouth? This applies just as much to the "left" union general secretaries as to the New Labour-backing bigwigs in the TUC's Congress House, who are too busy producing pamphlets on how to look for work to defend the jobs workers already had...

Much of the radical left, for their part, also refused to support the strikes, playing the game of the trade union bureaucracy. Swallowing whole the media caricature that the working class are exclusively Anglo-Saxon and racist, they conceded political territory to nationalists who wanted to leech off the wildcat movement (only to be rebuffed by picketers, who throughout the strike developed their slogans and taught us all a lesson in class solidarity).

That strike wave was worth a thousand protest marches, and represented a concrete step forward for the workers' movement. The anti-union laws which have strangled the trade union movement from Thatcher to Brown—outlawing solidarity action and making wildcat actions 'impossible' due to the demand for a ballot—were simply cast aside, and one month

later there have still not been any charges brought. Aside from its symbolic significance, the strike was also a success at a material level, defending the principles of the national agreement for workers in the industry and restoring the jobs of a hundred workers threatened with redundancy.

No, the wildcats were not the first steps of revolution: but they did point to the movement as a whole that there is a way forward; that defeat is not inevitable; and that we can stand up for ourselves at a time when our rulers say that we have to suffer because "we're all in it together". With more solidarity, and with a concerted effort by others in the labour movement to spread the wildcat movement, the strikers could have dealt an even greater blow and put us on an even better footing to organise: in that sense there was an opportunity missed.

We can look to the massive strike days in France and Greece, where millions of workers defy the ruling class, and sit in awe at 'revolutionary' types abroad, apparently always taking to the streets. No doubt, such struggles are inspiring and we have much to learn from them. But there is no God-given or cultural reason why the same and better is not possible even in Britain—before the 1984-85 miners' strike the labour movement here was the strongest in Europe, and a renaissance is quite possible.

Certainly there are big struggles ahead. The ruling class is in ideological retreat, Brown's government is spiralling into collapse, and after Lindsey, the anti-union laws look powerless. We must not miss this chance to make concrete victories.

what unions do we have, and what do we need?

Faced with the biggest capitalist crisis for decades, the official labour movement has sat on its hands. But if the TUC won't act now, what is its purpose? Workers need to discuss the means by which we are going to *resist* this recession.

At Monday's public forum we be looking at the struggle against redundancies; the dynamics of rank-and-file and bureaucracy in the unions; and the new forms of action used by casual workers.

Speakers: **Alberto Einstein Durango** (cleaner activist involved in campaigns at Schrodgers and Willis in the City of London, despite Unite's resistance), **Fabien Liberski** (rep at Southwark Council victimised with the support of UNISON) and **John Moloney** (Independent Left candidate for PCS assistant general secretary).

7pm, Lucas Arms, Grays Inn Road, King's Cross, Monday 30th March

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