

# the★commune

for communism from below and workers' self management

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visteon-ford workers show us how it's done...

# go forth and occupy!

## editorial of *The Commune*

The first week of April saw the leaders of world capitalism converge on London for the G20 summit, which agreed to a version of Gordon Brown's latest plan to “save the world”. The Prime Minister boasted that a “historic” \$1.1 trillion programme of investment and new regulation for international finance would mean a “new world order”.

Such efforts at state support for the financial giants and Brown's “quantitative easing (printing money)” may indeed serve to relieve some rather constipated markets. And yet the slogan of the London summit “Stability. Growth. Jobs.” and the grandiose speeches of our rulers ring hollow to the many millions who are being put out of a job and whose services are being slashed as a result of the capitalists' crisis *in the here and now*.

There is nothing new about the “new world order”: the bubble of neo-liberalism having been burst, the ruling class in the USA, UK, France and so on have resorted to the well-worn Keynesian formulas of the past. The ideological baggage of just a couple of years ago—when Brown and his ilk extolled the virtues of the free market and getting filthy rich—has now been junked and seamlessly replaced with attacks on “greedy” bankers and attempts to posture as ‘socially responsible’, such as when Deputy Labour Leader Harriet Harman called for the return of the enormous pension paid out to ex-RBS chief Fred “the shred” Goodwin.

Our rulers know the mess they're in, and that a healthy dose of state intervention might help steady the ship of capitalism in stormy times. Through organisations like the G20, the ruling class can plan the interests of capital on a larger scale and on a longer time-frame than any individual bank's boardroom ever would. Seeking to root out ‘bad eggs’ in the system like Fred Goodwin or the fraudster Bernie Madoff, governments want the ‘responsible’ running of capitalism.

Despite what Labourite union leaders might want to believe, Gordon Brown's statement, “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” is therefore no evidence that the Labour government is anything other than part and parcel of the capitalist class. Whatever sops they may deliver to appease us, states and collectives of states like the G20 are just cartels which serve the interests of capital *as a whole*.

One thing they cannot do is represent the interests of the working class. Such institutions are run by and for the ruling class and have nothing to do with the vast majority of people, those of us who do not own banks or call centres or administer armies and government departments, but who must either sell our capacity to work in order to survive, or try and eke out an existence on state handouts.

We cannot ‘control’ the G20, whose sole purpose is to better plan the system of exploitation and whose summit was held in secret, miles from the centre of London and ringed by thousands of armed police. This was made even more clear with the soggy ‘Put People First’ demonstration organised by the Trades Union Congress, liberal NGOs and charities which meekly pleaded for Obama, Brown, Sarkozy and co. to hand down a few crumbs to the rest of us... achieving nothing. The jobs massacre puts tens of thousands more on the dole every week, and more jobs are neither going to fall from the sky nor from the top table of the G20 summit.

To defend workers' interests, there is simply no substitute for workers' self-organisation: workers standing up for themselves, *asserting* their power rather than hoping for mercy. Forcing the capitalists to relent rather than waiting for them to do it of their own accord. And it is precisely this force which has now exploded onto the political scene.

>>> continues page 3

# mitie cleaners resist city of london bosses

by Jake Lagnado

## The story

In mid-2007 around 25 cleaners at multinational insurance brokers the Willis Group based in the City of London began to organise under the umbrella of Unite's Justice for Cleaners campaign, for the campaign's main demands of the 'living wage' rather than the minimum wage.

The campaign, largely modelled on similar campaigns run by the American union SEIU, aims to target key workplaces in a particular sector it wants to unionise. The idea is that after a limited time pouring resources into unionising this sector, a self-sufficient union structure is left in place, and resources are switched to another campaign in another sector.

The buildings the union targets have to fulfill certain conditions: they should have a minimum number of workers; employ a cleaning contractor the union is targeting; and be in the geographical zone selected for the campaign. By winning in key workplaces it is hoped that a 'zonal agreement' can be reached which extends the gains to all workers in that sector in the locality.

Resources are not put into workplaces which don't meet these criteria, even where there is interest from the workforce. The Latin American Workers Association knows a number of such examples. There are also occasional examples of workers have succeeded in pressurizing the union to be included in the campaign

In January 2008 Mitie finally agreed to pay Willis cleaners the much vaunted living wage. But there was a catch: they wanted to switch from evening working (7pm-11pm) to all-night working (10pm-6am). That meant an increase in hours and reduction in the workforce – in other words less people doing more work. Against the usual business competition, Mitie had recently renewed its contract with Willis and clearly keeping costs down was part of the reason!

The cleaners sent a petition demanding this did not happen. But despite talks taking place the change went ahead anyway. The union agreed to hold a demonstration but it was cancelled with an hour to spare when Mitie offered to relocate the workforce to HBOS with the same terms and conditions. It was in the shop steward's words the will of the majority that they should stay together as a group working the same hours.

In the midst of this some unorthodox tactics were used: for example the cleaners leafleted the office workers desks. Also workers successfully persuaded the union to include a key activist who had been fired.

The problem returned when the temporarily relocated workers including the shop steward came to the end of their temporary contracts. A few were relocated on a permanent basis, others got other jobs. In that way the size of the group was reduced. Few stood the all-night working long – the workforce at Willis now is reputedly a different set of workers altogether.

Mitie offered the remaining six workers unsuitable alternative positions in order to meet its legal requirements, and finally made them redundant in December 2008.



They appealed the decision anyway and independently wrote to the company saying that they would demonstrate if no response was received. When the company found out about this they arranged for the workers to come in. The workers called off the demo at the union's request, only for the meeting to prove a waste of time. The union informed them that although they had another right of appeal, there was really nothing more to be done. At the end of their tether, the workers called the first of their protests, but not before desperately trying to seek further advice from their union.

The weekly protests have now been going on for over two months. They have inspired because they go against the grain of the usual resignation that meets redundancies. Victory perhaps lies not so much now in reinstatement, but in showing that fighting back is possible.

At the time of *The Commune* going to press the union has made no public pronouncement, but has worked hard in the face of adverse publicity to persuade those on the inside of the union that this is a cause *not* worth supporting. Why?

Because the workers went outside the rules by demonstrating when they shouldn't have. And in the Willis case, it appears it was national Unite officers at the highest level who told lower ranking officials that this was union policy.

## Lessons

Launching wage rise campaigns makes good publicity, but companies don't usually intend to spend a penny more on their workers. So they may award the wage rise but will then make up for it by increasing the workload, making people redundant and, crucially, reducing and thereby dispersing organised workforces. As we know, campaigning after the event in the case of redundancies is extremely hard as people don't have the same power. Even in the case of Gate Gourmet it was shocking how soon after the official settlement the issue of those left on the outside became a non-issue – something which I have never seen properly discussed on the left.

The Justice for Cleaners campaign has many echoes of SEIU campaigns in the US. Most of all, in the top-down way they are controlled and the way they sit easily with the partnership approach to industrial relations. The organizing approach does not mean an end to the partnership approach, despite a certain amount of 'militant' posturing e.g. noisy demos, occasional sit-ins and the like. It is of course better such organising campaigns happen than they don't. It is also important to note that, as in this case, workers do fight within them to make their own demands heard, and use tactics outside the campaign rulebook.

At the same time there is no doubt that union officials, especially those caught up in the almost religious fervour of some organising campaigns, react very badly when workers play outside their rules. When cleaners at nearby Schroders bank held their own self-organised protest in late 2008, the union sanctioned it at the very last minute after repeated attempts to postpone it. But it also sent an organiser down to desperately try to control what the cleaners chanted and what leaflets they gave out.

Finally the Willis case brings up the issue of union policy which prohibits protests while negotiations and internal procedures are going on. How many recognition agreements is this written into? Even if – and it is questionable – there are tactical reasons for not officially sanctioning protests during talks, it is outrageous that any union should actually use this as a reason not to represent it as members. It reveals such an agreement as one by which both union and company control workers. In particular, where unions call off protests supposedly to allow talks to place.

# no to “no2eu”!

by Dave Spencer

Just two and a half months before June 4th's European elections, the RMT leadership came up with a new party “No2EU - Yes to democracy”. Without a hint of irony (remember “Yes to democracy”) we are told that this “party” is for election purposes only. There will be no membership, therefore no voting for the slate of candidates needed for the election and, worse still, there will be no continuation of the party after the election. Indeed the whole thing has been cobbled together by the RMT, Communist Party of Britain and Socialist Party leaders, who will run it by themselves.

Furthermore if any “No2EU” candidate is elected to be an MEP they will not take their seat in Brussels. The voice of the British working class will not be heard in Europe. There will be no speaking tours to make links with European workers in struggle, no greetings brought to mass demonstrations and strikes, no attempt to build a new Europe-wide workers' movement. No, the “No2EU” MEPs will stay at home in Britain.

And who will pay for this last minute stunt? It costs £5,000 as a deposit for each slate in each constituency. Then you need to pay for at least a million leaflets in each constituency. Presumably RMT members are paying for it, with the CPB and SP jumping on board for the ride.

In an emergency situation you could possibly see the need for such an initiative. And indeed there is an emergency! At the recent G20 summit the leaders of world capitalism were thrashing about without a Plan B other than the continuation of market forces with a little neo-Keynesian tweaking. The future for the global working class is dire, with increasing unemployment and poverty certain. The future of the earth's ecosystem is bleak unless we change the economic system.

What is the answer of the British Left leaders? “No2EU”! It completely misses the point, and is at best a diversion.

“The Left” has had five years to work out a strategy for this European election. Parties like the Greens decided their slates of candidates over a year ago and have been collecting the necessary finances. Two months before an election is not serious. Furthermore, what is going to happen in the General Election next year? The new party is not going to be continued after June 4th, so are we going to see another half-hearted attempt two months before that election? And what will the slogans be? “No to the British capitalist state?” And the MPs won't take their seats?

Over the past twelve years we have had the Socialist Labour Party, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Socialist Alliance, Respect and Campaign for a New Workers' Party, all of which have failed to build an open, democratic mass movement of the working class. We have Gordon Brown and global capitalism on the ropes and no organisation ready to challenge them. “No2EU” is exactly the opposite of what is needed - it is bureaucratic and nationalistic - where we want democracy and internationalism, nothing less.

Some comrades have called the politics of “No2EU” “left-wing nationalism”. Perhaps this is to keep the embarrassment within the left family. Personally I cannot see how British nationalism in the context of global capitalism can be anything other than right wing and reactionary, pure and simple. All nation states and governments have lost some power within global capitalism and with the IMF dictating their domestic policies The tentacles of international companies are everywhere.

Take the car industry. In the 1950s in Britain it was popular to talk about the Big Six British car firms, down from 120 firms in the 1920s. The call for the nationalisation of the Big Six made some sense. Now in 2009 there is talk of the Big Six car firms in the world. In Britain there is no 'national' car firm. Jaguar Land Rover is owned by the Indian conglomerate Tata; Toyota and Honda are based in Japan; Nissan

(Japan) is linked to Renault (France); Vauxhall is part of the European operation of General Motors (USA) together with Opel, Fiat... the list goes on. The factories making the parts for the cars, the petrol used to fuel them, the steel to make the cars are all part of global capitalism. Decisions are made in boardrooms all over the world usually without any reference to the British nation state. To call for the nationalisation of the car industry is not a straightforward matter anymore. The internationalisation of the industry would make more sense. International solidarity among workers, workers' control of their workplaces and plans for how that workplace could make socially useful products would be a start.

When there is an economic recession, the first reaction is to find scapegoats, usually immigrants or foreigners. The No2EU leaflet complains about “social dumping” which refers to foreign workers coming to Britain for jobs. This is a disgraceful, reactionary statement. It is one thing to talk about defeating the BNP and UKIP in the European elections but surely not by stealing their political clothes! Workers of the world unite does not just mean British workers; it means the fight for equal wages, rights and conditions for all workers wherever they live - and not to be divided by the capitalists and played off one against the other.

The politics of the No2EU party are clearly driven by the CPB with its *British Road to Socialism*, Socialism in One Country and yearning for popular frontism. Other left groups involved appear to include the Socialist Party, the International Socialist Group and Tommy Sheridan's Solidarity. The SWP and Respect seem to be reserving judgement. One can only speculate about their motives. Usually their main consideration is how many members they can get for their own organisation, and how to outmanoeuvre rival groups. The clear need for an open democratic internationalist communist workers' party opposed to New Labour is still there - preferably before the next General Election! In my opinion the RMT's “No2EU” initiative and the left groups' support for it, however lukewarm, are barriers to building that party.

# the commune

## editorial: we can defy the jobs massacre

Workers have nothing to rely on other than our own strength. Petitions and charters, appeals to statesmen and grand plans for what we think a “workers’ government” would do in Gordon Brown’s place are not much use to anyone being put out of a job. They are little better for these workers than the TUC’s pamphlets on how to access the JobCentre, and will do no more to solve the greatest problem in the British labour movement today, which is not as much a lack of numbers—with some seven million trade unionists—as the lack of confidence which has afflicted unions and most social movements since the crushing of the miners’ strike a quarter of a century ago.

What really shows the way forward are the struggles coming from below, some of which are reported on in this issue of *The Commune*. We should not collapse into euphoria that capitalism is collapsing—most class fights at the moment are about resisting attacks rather than taking a punch at the employers—but there is certainly room for optimism, because the idea of taking collective action and fighting back is being popularised and confidence is being restored.

The most significant example is perhaps the Ford-Visteon factory occupations in Belfast and London (pages 4-5) which echo the long-lost assertive tactics used by the British labour movement at its peak in the early 1970s. The Ford-Visteon workers are not only challenging their bosses’ right to cast aside their agreements, but also show that it is possible to fight back. Unlike the TUC bigwigs (the supposed ‘leadership’ of our movement!) these workers do not accept that the recession is some unstoppable force of nature which legitimises a torrent of management attacks and gives free rein for bosses to get rid of their workforce as they please.

By taking over the building where the workplace is situated, occupations pose a real challenge to the capitalists’ right to manage and their sacred property rights, and we can only be delighted by the increasingly widespread use of this tactic. Workers at Prisme in Dundee also occupied—but occupations are not just for factories! Fighting the slashing of public services, on Friday 3rd April parents at two primary schools

in Glasgow facing closure barricaded themselves in the gym and assembly halls, saying they would stay overnight and vowing to stay until the council caved in. Two weeks later, as *The Commune* went to press, St. Gregory’s and Wyndford Primary Schools were still occupied.

Abroad too we can see evidence of the use of assertive tactics, such as the FCI Microconnections factory in the western suburbs of Paris, where half of a workforce of 400 have been in occupation for seven weeks in an effort to stop their jobs being farmed out to Singapore. At a Sony plant in the south-west of France the chief executive was held prisoner in an office by dozens of workers who had been made redundant.

The spectre of Tory and New Labour anti-union laws has long weighed heavily on the minds of those who wanted to take action, and has been even more loudly trumpeted by ‘left’ union leaders like PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka who needed an excuse to resist strike calls. Just before we went to press the RMT postponed strike action on the London Underground to re-ballot—despite having a huge mandate already from the membership—after a court injunction from the employers told them to stop it.

Yet in February the oil refinery wildcat strikes which broke out at Lindsey and spread across Britain just swept these anti-union laws aside with impunity. Thousands of workers went on strike without ballots, had picket lines far larger than the permitted six people, and furthermore strike sympathisers such as the 600 Polish workers at Langage Power Station mounted illegal solidarity action. The workers did not need permission from the state or the Unite leaders – they decided they wanted to stand up for their jobs and then just went ahead and did it.

Aside from its symbolic significance, that strike wave was also a success at a material level, defending the principles of the national agreement in the industry and saving 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. But at least we can say that there are emerging signs of confidence in the labour movement.

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.

In order to recompose a real, living labour movement, as strong and stronger than what existed in the 1970s, labour movement activists must both learn lessons from the great struggles of that period—including promoting the use of tactics like occupations and flying pickets—but also draw confidence from the self-organisation happening *today* and try and generalise its democratic and confident means of organising. These typify not only the movement we want today but also the character of the communist society that such a movement might eventually achieve.

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. There have been several cases of self-organised resistance to the jobs cull, and there is potential to pull the strands together into an emboldened class movement. We must not miss this chance to make concrete victories.

## of policemen and mad professors: communism and physical force

by Chris Kane

The Police operation around the G20 was entitled “Operation Glencoe” – named after the massacre in Scotland in 1692 when the order was given that “the rebels, the McDonalds of Glencoe” were to be “put all to the sword”. Operation Glencoe lived up to its namesake resulting in the Police manslaughter of Ian Tomlinson returning home from work. The G20 summit was surrounded by an atmosphere of hysteria whipped up by the media, the Police and mad professor Chris Knight, the self-appointed spokesman for the protests. This was done in a way that made protest and violence almost synonymous. These events have posed anew the question of violence and of legality as they relate to the project of creating a new society.

Most working class people abhor violence, particularly anti-social crime. Contrary to the lies of capitalist politicians communists also abhor violence, we seek a society fit for human beings where the social conditions which give rise to forms of violence will be uprooted, the need to resort to violence will be vastly diminished and subject to the interests of humanity. But this new society will not be achieved without physical force: this may seem a paradox but it flows directly from the nature of the society we live in today.

Capitalism is an exploitative society, it does not serve the interests of the majority: it is controlled by a small capitalist class. The needs and desires of the majority, the workers, count for little against those whose main interest is to accumulate capital. This is a system which turns ever more aspects of life into a commodity. It breeds conflict between individuals, classes and nations. It is a system in which violence is endemic, arising from alienation and social-breakdown. But there is an overarching violence that is shrouded in justification – that is the legalised violence of the state.

Behind the mask of parliamentary democracy the key function of the state is the maintenance of capitalism and keeping the ruling class ruling. Symptomatic is who runs things, a disproportionate number of MPs, Ministers, judges, officers and senior civil servants still come through the filter of public schools and Oxbridge universities. The state inter-



venes peacefully, such as to prop up banks and also in countless examples with naked violence against workers. There exists a vast legal framework of repressive laws in the UK which can be deployed against perceived or actual threats to the authority of the ruling class.

Discussion of these issues is often caught in the falsely counterposed merits of peaceful over violent methods. It is however a myth that the communist revolution is characterised by the presence or absence of violent struggle. Revolutions are not distinguished by violence but by their class content; the capitalist class has come to power in some countries in violent struggle and in others peacefully. Some on the traditional left see violence as the defining feature of being a revolutionary, as a gauge of militant sentiment. Such posturing ignores the actual social and political situation of the working class, the ways it can utilise existing political channels and the need for self-organisation of the mass of workers.

We find this posturing amongst the middle class left such as the antics of the aforementioned Chris Knight’s ‘Government of the Dead’, who would have us engage in directionless attacks on a stronger force, as if that was ‘revolution’. These theatrics and elitist styles of organising actually make workers more vulnerable to repression without in the slightest assisting in the development of their self-organisation or ability to defend themselves.

On the other hand, to declare the use of only legal methods as a matter of principle can only disarm our class. Adher-

ents of this view range from ecological activists to Labourite socialists. They want to tie the working class to a moral code formed not out of the actual conditions of this society which forces the working class into struggle, but their own idealist visions and political prejudices. From the moral-force Chartists to the Labour Party they have been an historic failure. It is self-defeating, as can be seen most starkly in the face of the BNP against which the traditional left has shown itself politically and *physically* impotent!

At present genuinely revolutionary activity as opposed to its caricature should involve a combination of tactics. Revolutionary progress can advance effectively legally and peacefully as long as such methods are available to be utilised. Similarly communists as opposed to sectarians advocate full trade union rights in the Police and military, whose members are drawn from the working class. We do so to help develop the utmost dissent and potential for wider class unity. However to contend that a social transformation can be achieved by conforming to the particulars of legality would be to abandon communism, just as the “official” Communist Party of Britain has done. Simultaneously our movement must utilise *illegal* means when necessary. Yet while calls for breaking the anti-union laws find a resonance amongst many, when communists speak of the use of physical force, very few appreciate its necessity for our struggles.

The tradition of physical force is an intrinsic part of our movement’s history which desperately needs reviving. This is not to advocate ‘anarchist adventurism’ but direct action by self-organised workers, from occupying workplaces and *securing* them to organising protests that are capable of effectively defending themselves with clear objectives. Critics of communists will call us ‘ultra-left’ advocates of violence. But the force we advocate is not individual or elitist: it is a call for organised force controlled by the workers. The development of physical force is intimately linked to generating consciousness in our class of its position in society, and being able to take the offensive against capital and form organisations capable of replacing the existing state with a system of communal self-government.

# workers occupy visteon factories

by Samantha O’Driscoll

Background

At 2pm Tuesday 31st March, 565 of Visteon’s 610 UK work-force at three sites in Belfast, Basildon and Enfield were given six minutes notice of their dismissals, as Visteon UK filed for administration. That night, the dismissed workers at the Belfast plant entered the factory and began their occupation. The next day, Enfield workers went back to the factory to collect their belongings and having heard news of the Belfast occupation, seized the moment and found a fire exit unlocked and entered the plant to begin their occupation.

Workers in Basildon, however, were unable to enter the plant but began their fight with pickets and protests at Ford and Visteon sites.

Back in 2000 the Ford owned global components subsidiary Visteon was sold off as a ‘highly profitable’ company, with a turnover of \$17.96 billion, in order to generate funds for Ford and restructure production. Pre-sell off, Visteon UK Swansea plant employed 1000 workers, Enfield 900, and Essex and Belfast each employed 600. When the sell-off was negotiated, Ford guaranteed to Visteon workers that their terms and conditions as Ford employees would be protected for life, as the company itself stated in documents given to workers ‘For the duration of your employment with Visteon UK, your terms and conditions . . . will mirror Ford conditions. This means lifetime protection while an employee of Visteon UK of all your contractual conditions of employment.’ Despite this Ford claims it has ‘no legal or moral obligations’ to the Visteon workers.

In the years after the sell-off Visteon embarked on a new direction that involved transferring operations to lower-cost countries and significantly culling its UK workforce, to the extent that by the time the company filed for administration only 610 jobs remained, out of the previous 2500, and the Swansea plant closed in 2007. Internal documents have revealed that the company was preparing for closure of the Belfast plant as early as January 2007. This indicates that the global downturn is being used by Visteon as a cover to carry out its plan to shift production to low cost areas as cheaply as possible by evading consultation with workers and severance packages.

The workers

The story told so far could have easily concluded at this point as it has in many workplaces and companies around the UK and the world, were it not for a spark that ignited the resistance to Visteon’s treatment of the workers. The worker’s initial feelings of disbelief and anger, but acceptance, within a day of hearing about the Belfast occupation, turned into a spirit of defiance, resilience and refusal to submit to their new fate their bosses had handed them, declaring ‘This is a fight we can win, we’re off our knees and fighting fit!’ They quickly set about organizing the occupation, establishing rotas, barricading doors, and setting up the factory to make it as comfortable as possible for the occupiers. Workers also organised daily visits to the Basildon factory and the Dagenham Ford plant, highlighting the Ford-Visteon link and gaining solidarity from Ford workers in Southampton and Bridgend who are said to be blacking Visteon components.

Whist in Enfield and Basildon the workers were demanding severance terms outlined in their contracts, the workers in Belfast were demanding not only severance terms but also overturning job losses ‘we want the plant reopened, we have a full order book and are ready to operate’. This more far reaching demand no doubt contributed to the determination of the Belfast workers to continue the occupation, when Enfield did not.

workers stand high atop the occupied enfield visteon factory



The union

The union movement’s (in this instance Unite) response to massive job cuts and closures of entire workplaces so far has been weak and ineffectual, demonstrating no tangible resistance to the employers’ offensive. Faced with a tangible fight back in the case of the Visteon occupations, the union’s lack of practical support for the continuation of the occupation and its persuasion of the workers to leave the factory, before any deal had been reached, was seriously misguided and contrary to the workers’ interests. Unite’s press release on the closure of Visteon did not even mention the fact that the workers had taken action to occupy the factories, instead it merely stated that ‘Unite will press the case for compensation. We hope Visteon will do the right thing’. ‘Hope’ is a very weak bargaining tool having persuaded the workers into giving up the occupation and thus losing the best leverage they had of winning the dispute. Furthermore, even when Belfast workers were demanding that the plant be reopened, Unite’s statement makes no reference to this demand forming part of their negotiation. The lack of coordination of demands taken up by the union weakened both occupations’ longer term viability.

The Visteon occupations have kick-started the fight back against the employers’ offensive in the recession. Court threats and the vacillation of Unite have presented major obstacles to the workers’ struggle, but the experience at all three sites will contribute to the strength of the movement as a whole and allow us to understand how we can better organise to stop redundancies in their tracks.

**For more news and updates on the fight at Visteon Enfield, visit [www.visteonoccupation.org](http://www.visteonoccupation.org). The site carries some news on the other two plants too. Until the workers get their own account, they are asking for solidarity cheques to be addressed to ‘Haringey Solidarity Group’, PO Box 2474, N8. Join the solidarity email list at [visteon\\_support@haringey.org.uk](mailto:visteon_support@haringey.org.uk)**

## dynamics of the struggle at visteon

**Some supporters at the occupation at Enfield Visteon produced this article on the end of the action**

The occupation was an inspiration for many - the spirit of the workers who refused to submit to being blatantly robbed by their bosses seemed to be what many had been waiting for, for far too long - the early possible signs of a resurgence of class struggle. Now that the occupation is ended without any clear victory in sight, some reflection is needed on the strengths and weaknesses of what has happened. It is always easy to be wise after the event, and necessary to be careful not to forget who initiated this struggle and took the risks. Any criticisms are as much of ourselves as supporters as of the occupiers. Still, we’ll never get very far in developing our struggles if we don’t reflect on where we went wrong and how we all might do things better next time.

The union may claim that there could be legal penalties for failing to comply with the undertaking given in court on Monday 6th to leave the factory by noon on Thursday 9th. But none of this appears very convincing or in the workers’ interest: they have surrendered their greatest bargaining asset, the possession of the plant, its machinery and stock. So the negotiations restart on Tuesday 14th from a weakened position for the workers. The picketing that is planned to replace the occupation will be less effective in preventing repossession of Visteon property. And legal threats can probably be applied to enforce restrictions on picketing activity too.

The rough conditions in the factory shouldn’t be underestimated, but another few days might have made all the dif-

### London

The Commune can be found on most demonstrations and we also hold our own regular public meetings.

We are currently engaged in a series of ‘uncaptive minds’ forums on the subject of “Capitalism and the working class today”. There is a meeting every three weeks—see [thecommune.co.uk](http://thecommune.co.uk) for details.

We also organise a reading group on “communism from below”, which also meets every three weeks. Texts and details available online.

Join the London announcements list: <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommune-london>

### Wrexham

by Steve Ryan

Communards have been busy pushing a May Day march and rally through the local trade council. The theme will be around May day as a workers movement day as opposed to the racism and hate of the BNP, who are active in the area.

After the march a series of meetings are being arranged around the title “Storming the heavens - alternatives to capitalism”. Paper sales will also be launched in and around the town centre.

Contact via [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com)

### Coventry (and everywhere else...)

We are trying to start some activities in the West Midlands, so if you’re in the area, get in touch with our comrades via [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com)

We also have a new Facebook group with details on all of our activities nationally (and which will also feature some political discussion and debate). You can sign up at:

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/group.php?gid=100975860952>

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ference to the outcome that may determine the workers' long-term financial future. (The Ford pension fund is already 100s of millions in the red.) It had already been suggested that a rota system could've been set up, with help from supporters, to ease the strain of manning the occupation.

Even the judge queried if the union could guarantee the obedience of the occupiers. One would think that all the union would have needed to do to protect themselves is to say that they had made an effort to persuade the occupiers to leave. The occupiers themselves could have stayed with no legal sanctions hanging over them other than a standard possession order common in squatting cases. The agreed undertaking with Visteon was that they would not seek possession while negotiations continue. Visteon - and the union - made that conveniently obsolete by agreeing to postpone revealing any details of the deal until the 14th (if there even is any deal). One can speculate that if a really satisfactory deal was on offer the union would already be shouting it from the rooftops.

The union and the left have already begun to claim this struggle as a victory on the grounds that it forced the company to the negotiating table and that it has inspired other workers. These are partial truths, though any real assessment would have to be made after any deal is sealed. But the fact that the workers have been manoeuvred by the union into a vulnerable position where they could easily be screwed is something not to be glossed over, as the left will want to. This false optimism is only a means of repressing reflection on limits and strengths of what has happened, and a recipe for a repeat of the same errors in the future.

In the final meeting of occupiers no real opposition was expressed to the union's direction to walk out. This despite some occupiers in earlier conversation expressing a desire to carry on until a decent deal is struck. The same union convenors, who in the beginning had said they and the other occupiers would never leave until a satisfactory deal was agreed, were now obliged to convince the workers they must leave with nothing guaranteed, only rumours of a possible mysterious deal to come. Some in the meeting voiced serious criticisms of the union for keeping them in the dark about developments and not giving enough support to the occupation, but most were by now either relieved or resigned to walking out. The union's authority to ultimately decide the fate of the workers was not challenged. Early on in the occupation, when it was mentioned that the union might pressure an end to the occupation against workers' wishes, a couple of workers replied "ah, but we *are* the union", as if the workers' collective voice could control the union structure. But once negotiations were organised by officials - on the other side of the world - and the whole process becomes remote and secret from the workers in the hands of specialists, they become dependent not on what they know, but on what they're told. And we know from long experience that the union hierarchy has its own vested interests to protect that often don't coincide with that of the workers.

As the occupiers came out, the SWP - never ones to miss an opportunist photo-opportunity - swamped the crowd with their placards and chanted 'the workers united will never be defeated'. Under the circumstances, this had a hollow and ironic ring. It began to feel, as nearly every strike has in the past 20 plus years - like one more predictable stitch up by union bureaucrats - more interested in helping Nu Labour manage capitalism in crisis than feeling the need to win even modest gains for workers. Even if a passable deal is struck next week, one could see the ending of the occupation as unnecessarily risky and bad strategy for the workers and an unsatisfactory capitulation to pressure from both Visteon and union bosses.

But it is often awkward to stick one's neck out; given the general identification with the union, many supporters felt sensitive about being openly critical of the union and its underlying agenda, for fear of being seen to be divisive. But at the end of the day it's no good repressing these criticisms - or glossing them over for the sake of some image of unity - when only the explicit recognition of these realities may prevent defeat.

It was a real contrast to see how much energy and resources went into the organising of the G20 protests compared to how much support the Visteon occupation was given. This is partly an indication of the difference in priority for some given to activist protest on the one hand and class struggle on the other - and partly that many useful G20 resources had already returned to their sources outside London. It is only now that the union - as the occupation ends - provided a caravan, brazier, toilets etc.

Documents uncovered by Visteon workers at Basildon suggest that closures have been planned for several years with the intention of restarting production with cheaper labour - and that the creation of spin off companies like Visteon is part of a long-term strategy to restructure and trim away the less profitable parts of the car industry. So the lessons and outcome here are important for whoever is next in line for the chop.

# political parties and workers' self management

by Goran Marković

Political parties fight to conquer political power. Even when in opposition they build their apparatus, which guides the party's activities and has the power to define its policies and behaviour. Political parties, especially when adapted for a parliamentary method of struggle, are under the control of a party bureaucracy which is hostile to the very idea of self-management because of the question as to whether the process of decision-making should be under the control of party elites or self-organised workers and citizens.

Even leftist political parties which advocate radical social change often see themselves as the bearers of such change, and think any new institutions must be led by party representatives. If a party has already developed its own bureaucracy it would certainly not be interested in developing such forms of social organisation which would decrease its power and influence. If the masses are despite this self-organised, the party bureaucracy may allow a degree of economic democracy (some form of participatory democracy) or wider political democracy (with forms of direct democracy) but would struggle hard to accept only those solutions which do not substantially jeopardise its position.

Bureaucracy can sometimes even draw such legislation as to enable it to delegate some of its representatives to managerial bodies (if we are talking about economic democracy) or to limit the possibilities for direct decision-making in other ways. Even if these means are not sufficient, bureaucracy still has at its disposal powerful means of propaganda and ideological dominance over people's minds, and it always acts from the positions of power which enable it to find solutions which suit itself.

Therefore, victory over bureaucracy and a change in the social role of political parties are essential preconditions for self-management. Undoubtedly, political parties will have significant role in any social change. They are part of all modern political cultures and it is not easy to persuade people that they can achieve their aims, especially far-reaching ones, without the support of strong political parties. On the other hand, political parties may try to use this way of thinking and political culture to impose themselves as the most important subjects of change. Even when new institutions have tried to implement direct democracy and self-organisation, political parties have sent their representatives in order to control them. This happened in all the revolutions of the twentieth century and with all new institutions created on the basis of direct democracy - soviets and factory committees in Russia, workers' and soldiers' councils in Germany, workers' committees in Portugal, etc. This is a great threat to self-management because of two reasons. Firstly, institutions of direct democracy and self-management mustn't become the field for party struggles and for the overbalance of one of the party factions. Secondly, if political parties succeed in imposing party issues as the dominant agenda for their work, these institutions would not also be able to include non-partisans, who represent the great majority of workers and citizens.

There is no totally secure way to neutralize party dominance over institutions of self-management. One of them could be of a legal nature - laws could establish that each institution of self-management could include only a portion of party members which is in accordance with total participation of party members among the population or the working class. Bearing in mind that in modern democracies between 6 and 10 per cent of citizens are members of political parties and that in periods of social upheavals this percentage rises significantly—but nevertheless under half of population—it could be reasonable that political parties' members could count on significantly less than half of the total places in self-managing institutions at all levels. Non-partisans can't contest elections for institutions of self-management on an equal footing with party members and therefore they should be specially protected. In Yugoslavia, for example, where self-management was been imposed by the constitution and with laws, Communist Party members constituted 60 per cent of municipal assemblies and up to 90 per cent of the federal assembly while they also prevailed in many workers' councils. This very fact, however, would not have been such a problem if the party had not been a disciplined structure whose members had to act according to party bodies' directives. So, if party members constituted a majority of members of workers' councils and other self-managing institu-

tions, they represented their party. Whether they represented their fellow workers or neighbours too was a rather less certain matter, because even if they formally had to act according to their voters' instructions, they also had to listen to their party.

Another way to limit party influence over institutions of self-management is the self-activity of workers and citizens who become aware of their own power in society and are not ready to submit their faith to party elites. In this case, a plurality of social organisations—political parties, trade unions and civic associations—as well as of new institutions of self-management—could be of decisive significance in diversifying power in societies. There would be no one centre guiding the whole of society and each organisation would serve as a piece of control over the others. In Yugoslavia, for example, there was only one party, whose members occupied all important posts, while the one-party system precluded any possibility of opposition, even from socialists. Trade unions too were under party control, much like other social organisations. This being the case, the party bureaucracy could decide to impose controlled and limited self-management. In that way it legitimised itself as a democratic and anti-Stalinist, while still retaining its power. Workers and citizens didn't have an alternative centre of power which they could use to fight bureaucracy when those institutions of self-management didn't function properly.

If existing political parties prove incapable of understanding importance of self-management, radical social layers could decide to act not only independently of parties but even against their will. They could try to organise a new party or political movement or choose to act without political representation in the form of a political party. If there are institutions of self-management, they could frame themselves in a national network such as a congress of workers' councils and to act under dual power along with political parties. If existing political parties have not lost much of their legitimacy and confidence among the social layers they aspire to represent, their role in society would be greater and institutions of self-management would face more obstacles from party elites. If existing parties prove incapable to lead the masses in social struggles or if there are no such strong parties, the chances of success are greater. This was the case in Argentina, where small left-wing parties were not able to control the movement of workers occupying the factories and establishing organs of workers' self-management. If existing political parties are strong enough to take over the movement toward self-management, but are not willing to do so because of their tight attachment to the established mode of parliamentary functioning, new institutions of self-management could take the opportunity to act independently of parties. Such a situation existed in France in 1968, when the Communists and the Socialists were not interested in radicalizing the students' and workers' movement. Of course, certain other factors precluded development of self-management.

Radical social change tend to lead to more open and participatory party structures. This is what theorists of participatory democracy (e.g. Carole Pateman and Nikos Poulantzas) wanted to see. However, more open party structures mean only that party elites are more vulnerable to the demands of the masses. If we want a fundamentally new democratic order, parties have to be restrained by self-management.

Self-managing society is a constant struggle between self-management and party elites. Elites want to preserve the social division between elite and mass, while the masses want everybody to become members of an universal "elite". This struggle decided the fate of Yugoslav self-management, for example. Self-management became an empty shell since the party elite was able to impose its dominance over self-managing structures—primarily through its control of surplus value and processes of decision-making—because party cadres represented the majority of members of almost all institutions, and because of their control of the ideological apparatus, the party having been proclaimed as the 'historic leader of working people to a better future'. These three key factors decisively influenced the final outcome of the struggle between the party elite and workers for dominance over self-managing structures.

**Goran Marković is one of the editors of the magazine *Novi Plamen* (The New Flame) with whom we have comradesly relations. This is a democratic socialist publication aimed at audiences across the territory of the former Yugoslavia. *Novi Plamen* has been pro-active in developing discussion on the questions of workers' self-management which has a long tradition in the labour movement in the Balkans. This article was also published by comrades in Hungary in the journal *Eszmelet* (Consciousness) in a special issue dedicated to self-government and direct democracy.**

# the struggle for women's emancipation today

Liz Leicester spoke to our 9th March London forum on the meaning of International Women's Day

First of all, as a socialist I would always say that the struggles of women and the self-activity of women is very much a part of the struggle for the self-emancipation of the whole working class, and I've always seen it in that context. That's where we have to place the issues that are called 'women's issues'.

A small quote I think is good, which I think The Commune has published on its website, by Francois Chesnais is "Inequalities and oppression do not exist separately from each other. They translate into concrete realities the way in which this mode of production, capitalism, functions." For me that's at the centre of this discussion about women's issues.

There are some very real and concrete things. There is an estimate, for instance, that women internationally do twice as much unpaid work in the home than they do paid work. That is not unimportant. But women in paid work are still dominated by a patriarchal system as well as class domination, even in countries where some progress has been made, such as this one, in reducing women's dependence on men.

However now we see in the oldest capitalist countries - again, such as this one - major attacks coming up on child-care, abortion rights and other services, on the so-called 'social wage' which women have won through their struggles. But of course in larger areas of the world, there is extreme poverty, exploitation, violence, rape, semi-slavery or even slavery of women and children - and I think children are an important part of this discussion. According to UNICEF, in the world's least developed countries, many of which are at war, women are three hundred times more likely to die during childbirth than in developed countries, and the highest rates of maternal deaths are - no surprise - in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These figures remind us of the extreme situation of the majority of women in the world.

I have reflected somewhat on what the origins of International Women's Day were, which this audience may well know. But for me as someone from the United States it's quite interesting, because that's a crucial part of the world and the American working class is a crucial part of whatever we're trying to do. Actually its origins go back to big strikes by women garment workers in the United States. At the turn of the century in New York there were 65,000 women employed in the garment trade, more women employed than in any other city in the United States. They were mostly young, single immigrant women working very long hours, and on 8th March 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay, voting rights and an end to child labour. Their slogan was 'bread and roses' - bread for food, roses for a better quality of life. Still, a hundred years on, you could say for most women in the world, that would be what they'd fight for and what they'd want.

There was a big strike a year later which was called the 'uprising of the 20,000' where, again, women in the garment trade, mostly aged between 16 and 25, struck for thirteen weeks in the face of violence, intimidation and arrests. But it did give rise to the designation of a Sunday - the last Sunday in February, at that point - as a National Women's Day, and then this was taken up by Clara Zetkin and the Second International, and at a conference in 1910 with a hundred women from seventeen countries, an International Women's Day was declared. I quote from the resolution, "In agreement with class conscious political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the socialist women of all countries will hold a women's day each year. The women's day must have an international character".

This spread most dramatically in Russia, where women workers staged a strike - against the advice of the Bolshevik Party - walking out of their Petrograd factories and calling on workers to join them. At the end of it around 20-30% of the workforce were on strike by March 23rd 1917, which marked March 8th in our calendar. And then, interestingly, down through the years, in 1977 the UN General Assembly picked this up. In all kinds of places - many former Stalinist countries - this is an official day, a holiday where men give flowers to women et cetera... so it's become something very

*women's day in iran, 1979: still today women are fighting terrible oppression*



different in a lot of places. But I think there are still some very genuine celebrations and struggles. Celebration by fighting, in some countries in the world.

In terms of the British working class and women in Britain, we can say the law has not done us too many favours. If we look at the figures, women now outnumber men in trade unions - just - in Britain. 29.7% of women workers are in unions, 27.2% of men, so we've passed... but a lot of that is due to the decline of the manufacturing industry and traditional male-dominated industries and the rise of the service sector. Thirty years of the Equal Pay Act, outlawing sex discrimination at work, and yet women's inequality is still fully prevalent in the workplace: full time women workers' wages are 81% of men's. The gender pay gap is even wider, men working longer hours more likely to get overtime, and part-time women workers only earn 59% of the average hourly male earnings. This hasn't changed, in over thirty years.

Lone parents make up a quarter of families, 90% of lone parents are women, and there are an increasing number of women in the workforce. But, in the current situation, which is interesting, women are more likely to face redundancies under the recession, almost double the male increase in redundancy rates over the last year. And of course, although the law outlaws direct discrimination, victimization and harassment, the number of cases brought to tribunal continues to rise, with one harassment case brought to an employment tribunal every week over the last five years. So what I'm saying is that the law really hasn't done it, and what we're talking about is organizing, struggling and fighting. Whatever that may mean - I don't have any easy answers - but the law certainly isn't doing it for women in Britain.

In the public sector, which is where I work, employment is highly gendered, with extreme patterns of both horizontal and vertical segregation. Horizontal in the sense that women tend to be school cooks, supervisors, home care workers - that level of people - but also vertical in the sense that the low paid in the same job categories tend to be women. So headteachers tend to be men, teaching assistants tend to be women.

The public sector is a very large employer of women - a third of all working women in the UK are working in the public sector - and a very high proportion of those are part time. Local government and the NHS are the two largest employers and both have a predominantly female workforce, so it's a huge group of workers. In local government half of workers are working part-time - an enormous number of people. According to Carole Thornley at Keele University, who's done a lot of work looking this area, the deterioration in gross pay in local government since 1992 has been enormous, and the gap between women workers and men has actually widened, according to her research. In UNISON, where I've been for some years, there's no doubting the very close relationship between gender, class, part-time work, domestic labour, and under-valuation of what is seen as women's work. Three quarters of the membership of UNISON are women, and one-third of those are working part-time. In the last few years we've had three fairly big disputes: the London weighting dispute, the dispute on pensions and the dispute over pay last summer. Though ACAS has just awarded us an extra 0.3% on top of our 2.45% pay rise - as someone said today, 'don't go booking a holiday...' - they haven't been enormously successful disputes.

Again, I think it's worth thinking about the fact that such a large proportion of the union are women and what that is all about. Some thoughts: first of all, there is a low density of members in the public sector, even if it's high in comparison with the private sector. Something like 51.8% are in unions; 69% are covered by collective agreements: so only just over half union density in the public sector. The action that was called in all three of these disputes was one or two days only. I don't only blame the union leaders for that, as some people would: there are complex issues in the public sector now, after twenty years post-Thatcher. I think there's a lack of experience, with a lot of young people who don't have the continuity that some of us have. A lack of confidence. And undoubtedly an issue for some groups of people - I think particularly for women who've been working very closely with service users like home carers, who are very committed to the work they're doing - is finding it very difficult to take that step out of that relationship. And then of course privatization, cuts, contracting out, all those things. We've got something like 1500 agency workers in a workforce of 6000. Those are temporary people, the people always at risk. Though you try and recruit them to the union, and some of them join, they are not employed by Camden but rather they are very much people to be taken on tomorrow and who, really, have no rights at all. I am sure that will be the situation across the public sector.

And then of course there's the union itself. In UNISON there has been real witch-hunting and victimization - it may be initiated by the employers, but it's been picked up by UNISON in some big high-profile cases. And then there's its relationship to New Labour, and the attitude of 'partnership' with the employers - which you always have to fight - that 'we're all in it together' and that 'if it's good for local government, it's good for the workforce, it's good for everybody...' There is a real philosophical battle to fight on that front.

It has to be said as well, and I say this having been very active in the women's group in Camden NALGO, that women's self-organisation does not always work in the union to mobilize. I'm not against it - I support it - but it hasn't worked. In my workplace it has reflected very much the social-democratic way of organizing where there's a women workers' unit, a gay and lesbian workers' unit, a black workers' unit or a disabled people's unit. All that went in the '80s with big cuts and frankly the union organization which reflected that began to fall apart. The only really still-effective group among the self-organised groups in our situation was the black workers' group. That may not be the case everywhere. Nationally in UNISON the women's committee is very, very conservative: one of the most conservative forces. Although I support it, it is full of contradictions,

The last thing I want to say is linked to what I said at the beginning and why I don't think this is separate from the class struggle. In Istvan Meszaros' book *Socialism or Barbarism* there's an interview with him about what revolution means now - the concept - and he refers to it as "the profound and ongoing revolutionary transformation of all facets of our social life. The new mode of controlling our social metabolism must penetrate into all segments of society. It is in that sense that the concept of revolution remains valid - indeed, in the light of our historical experience, more valid than ever. A revolution in this sense not only eradicates but also implants - you have to put in place of what is being removed something capable of taking deep roots."

# the g20 protests: the devil against the detail

by Nathan Coombs

First was the March 28th 'Jobs, justice, climate' rally: a quickly forgotten TUC organised trot through central London. Second was the April 1st protest at the Bank of England, where the four horsemen of the apocalypse descended on the Bank, against a fever pitch expectation set by the police and the media about the eruption of a 'summer of rage.' Something like 5,000 to 10,000 joined the protest at Bank, but the protest was not so much a unified event as a conglomeration of events, in a similar vein to the 'anti-globalisation' movement of the 1990s and beyond.

In the sense of history repeating itself, Chris Knight, the 'martyr' of the G20 Meltdown movement, declared an impending "Velvet Revolution" in the week running up to the protest, and the media were quick to invoke parallels with the May Day riots and to label the assorted anarchist groups and hodgepodge of protestors as 'anti-globalisation activists;'[1] even in the absence of any anti-globalisation banners, chants or slogans. Needless to say, neither the revolution, nor the anti-globalisation protest materialised. Or in other words, the form of the protests might have stayed the same, but the content had not. Yet surveying the post-mortem left commentary about the protest, the blinkers still seem to be on those that only saw what they expected to see, never mind what was simmering in an inarticulate bubble beneath the surface.

If it was a matter of seeing the protests through the eyes of absolute cynicism, we need look no further than a commentary by Frank Furedi: founder and ideologue of the disbanded Revolutionary Communist Party of Great Britain. According to Furedi, "What was really striking about the G20-related demonstrations against 'capitalism and climate chaos' - which took place outside the Bank of England and elsewhere in London - was the extent to which the opportunistic coalition of protesting moral crusaders represented a going-through-the-motions activism; they weren't so much representing a cause as searching for one." But since Furedi has staked out his position since the start of the economic crisis to persuade people that "In these confused times, we should attempt to defend capitalism" we should probably take his assessment with dose of cynicism ourselves.

Then again, that also does not mean we should swing to the other extreme of opportunistically propping up our rose tinted glasses. Predictably, for the Socialist Workers Party "the day of rage rocks system" even though "the mood of the protests was for the most part defiant and carnivalesque." Going further, for London Class War, the most militant contingent at the protest, "While the G20 leaders were slapping each others backs and congratulating each other on their next cunning plan to make more money off the backs of working people and pretending it's somehow for our benefit, their thugs were out attacking those who haven't fallen for their lies...Capitalism is on the rocks, they know it and we know it... we're more than a match for them as we proved outside the Bank of England. We will fight back." But how does this measure up to the reality of the events around the Bank of England?

Although there were little-reported cat and mouse street battles from about 7-8pm that spilled over from the Square Mile to London Bridge, the day after there was little evidence of a concerted militant campaign against the capitalist institutions or police force. Still, we can concede one point: against all the portrayals of the protestors being bullied, 'kettled' and assaulted by the police (all of which were true); the one thing not reported was that the 'kettling' tactic of the Metropolitan Police ended so violently because their lines were repeatedly pushed back, officers surrounded and they were forced into tactical retreats. In spite of the rhetoric of victimisation associated with the death of Ian Tomlinson - and the glimmer of a cover-up and police disingenuousness until the release of a video showing him being assaulted - this is the most encouraging consequence of the confrontation: many now understand the police's role as the armed wing of the state, and the fact that they can be beaten through strength of numbers.

As fun as all this ruckus was, however, it still does not get to the heart of the matter, namely: why, like all such protests nowadays, does the heat of the moment not translate into a lasting political movement? And what, if anything, has changed from similarly momentumless 'anti-globalisation' clashes in Seattle, Genoa and so on?

It is tempting to answer the question by turning inside out that old chestnut, 'the devil is in the detail,' and re-phrasing it 'the devil against the detail.' For what most distinguishes the current global economic crisis is the lack of ideas for capitalism being pushed from the elite quarters of society; a pre-

cise mirror of the crisis in ideas on the left too, sometimes to the point where it is almost impossible to tell them apart (what, for instance, at a fundamental level separates the 'Put People First' agenda from the programme of the Labour Party exactly?[2])

From elite quarters, capitalism's legitimisation has increasingly become limited to complementing libertarian parliamentary-democracy and the 'least worse alternative' to the state planned economy. Such people present themselves as presiding over untameable free-market capitalism, procrastinating over a lost time in which all legitimate alternatives have retreated forever. The historic mission of capitalism - the one that compelled historical materialism too - was the promised utopia, always just around the next corner. The Third Way of 'social democracy,' pre and post Blairite, was no more than an attempt to diffuse that utopia in the here and now: bringing the 'trickle down gains' of capital accumulation to the masses in advance of what capitalism could deliver, and a little bit of socialism in advance of any portended communist society. What we are witnessing today is the forestalling of that project, without either a corresponding reversion to the spirit of 'triumphant capitalism' or mass communist militancy.

Nevertheless, the truism that the ad-hoc protests at the Bank of England failed because they were not embedded in a wider revolutionary struggle can be explained in two ways. To put it in academese, there is firstly the ontological thesis. Into this category would fall the likes of Frank Furedi and former *Marxism Today* editor Martin Jacques. They argue that after the Cold War there has been a seismic and irreversible shift in the potential for collective subjectivity. Nowadays we act as atomised individuals and with this shift we can no longer hope to act collectively. There is no more priority accorded to the 'universal class,' and their party(s), than to a Jade Goody fan club of similar numbers. This irreversible shift means that there is no longer any agency to provide the immanence to capitalism's demise, as was the case with the bourgeois and early communist revolutions.

Or, there is a second take on the matter, which is that certain trends related to globalisation and the global division of labour have created the conditions that have ameliorated capitalist social antagonisms in the West. This argument - which I personally prefer, since I reject any ontological social theses as simply ideology - is that with the crisis in Western capitalism from the 1970s onwards[3], there was a coincidence between the financialisation of the economy and the reforms of the Deng Xiaoping era in China. With the declining rate of profit in the West, under Chinese boom conditions, foreign direct investment from the United States, Europe and Japan flowed into China at an unprecedented rate. The vast programme of primitive accumulation and exploitation in China resulted in the effective out-sourcing of manufacturing and the tendency towards a global division of labour. Essentially this globalisation process from the 1970s onwards was part and parcel of the collapse of the global revolutionary movement in all but the poorest countries, amongst other factors[4].

What that means here is that the antagonisms between labour and capital, production and consumption, have been papered over by the cheap credit and low inflation derived from high savings in the East. This itself is enough to lower the stakes of class-based politics to the point where militancy seems more detrimental than the risk it involves; and it also involves a quantitative and qualitative degradation of the working class in the West, reducing their relative power. This tendency has resulted in an abstract anti-capitalist movement, making arguments about the ills of the system without an agent to overthrow it, or even embody it in transitional struggles. Without an actual, concrete agent, the most wild voluntarism is possible: anything from advocating a return to mother Earth to bigging up Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood as the vanguard of global revolution, in the case of the Socialist Workers Party. Anti-capitalism is not only relieved of having to write 'recipes for the cookshops of the future,' but even of being embodied in a determinant agent that would provide some focus and limit the numbers of credible interpretations - and thus parties and groups - who could represent it.

But this global division of labour - and the geographical separation of classes and stages of production and consumption it entails - is not a process that can continue indefinitely. The logic of globalisation (at least in its neo-classical variants) entails the convergence hypothesis, whereby the class system will be leveled globally and transferred back to an intra-state distribution. If true, it will return to the localisation of antagonistic class politics and re-release the political.

Is it then simply a matter of waiting? No. As already commented, this global process is only a tendency and nothing

is remotely inevitable about it. The working class is neither inevitably defeated in the West, nor is it inevitably to be re-antagonised by global convergence. In this paradigm, it is worth being critical of the protest of the G20, but at the same time recognizing that even if the groups involved will not themselves lead us to a socialist or communist society, and may have totally the wrong idea about what that society may look like in any case, they at least maintain the conditions of the Idea of transcending capitalism: of resisting capitalism, the abstract system, rather than simply its expressions in 'bad egg' bankers, corrupt CEOs etc.

That said, what was most noteworthy about the G20 protest at the Bank of England was in fact the lack of widespread scapegoating of the bankers. In some of the angriest sections of the crowd I was in, some bankers even came to argue with the protestors and anarchists. From being strung up, or ruthlessly mobbed as the financial institutions warned their employees of, the worst they got was a bit of verbal abuse or jokes at their expense. And the RBS bank that was smashed up, seemed to only be done so because it was there, and bizarrely because it was not boarded up like all the other buildings in the vicinity.

At the recent Communism conference at the University of London's Institute of Education, addressing a young crowd of twenty-something students, intellectuals and activists Slavoj Žižek claimed the secret of realising communism today is that we are the ones who have to realise it[5]. By 'we' he meant the academics, students and activists of left-groups present in the audience; and implicitly he argued against sitting around waiting for it to arise from the working class. Against this dangerous idea, which can only lead to the kind of frustrations which gave birth to the Baader-Meinhof group, we should retain the insistence that communist transformation can only come from workers' struggles and the labour movement. At the same time, though, sustaining the Idea of Communism and the conditions where it can be thought, is a more widespread responsibility; as is supporting, and being critical towards, of any expressions which contribute to this.

In this spirit, the best that can be said of the recent G20 protests at the Bank of England is that unlike the anti-globalisation movement, the devil is no longer thought to be in the details of capitalism (lack of fair trade, the IMF etc.); but rather, more are now willing to think that capitalism itself is the devil. What is lacking is the detail of the alternative. After a century of Stalinist Communism, this will take a certain 'leap of faith' and a lot of imagination. Work to do.

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[1] Watching the coverage of the protest on BBC News 24, April 1st this was the term used until it was later changed to just 'protestors' or 'anarchist groups.'

[2] For a discussion of the TUC's recent pamphlet on 'coping with the economic downturn,' see "trade unions congress takes decisive actions against redundancies," *The Commune* (22nd March 2009)

[3] On the thesis of the forty-year crisis since the 1970s see the work of Robert Brenner and Giovanni Arrighi. These running arguments over the financial crisis and potential alternatives can be found in the *New Left Review*, issues 53 - 56, Aug 2008-April 2009.

[4] Another hypothesis for the collapse is advanced by Dayan Jayatilleka: that the extreme use of violence by revolutionary groups in a number of key Third World theatres in the 1970s and subsequent loss of 'moral advantage' led to a collapse of the overall global revolutionary movement. *Fidel's Ethics of Violence* (London: Pluto Press, 2007). For my critique of Jayatilleka's hypothesis see: Nathan Coombs, "Divine Violence, Fatal Splitting," *Radical Philosophy* 155 (forthcoming May 2009). In my PhD thesis I advance another hypothesis that the belief systems of Marxism - how to get from a Marxist *analysis* to a Marxist *response* - became over-burdened in the 20th century by competing interpretations (Trotskyist, Stalinist, Maoist, Castroist etc.), resulting finally in a splitting of the terms Marxism and revolution from each other. In this frame the Islamic revolution in Iran represented a tipping point when the institution of revolution no longer held the emancipatory promise of Marxism.

[5] For reviews of the conference see: Patrick Hayes, "Time to Think," *Culture Wars* (Friday, 10th April 2009); David Broder, "report of conference, 'on the idea of communism,'" *The Commune* (15th March 2009)

(See <http://thecommuine.wordpress.com/2009/04/12/the-g20-protests-the-devil-against-the-detail/> for full references and links to the above articles)

# leftist opposition gains ground in algeria poll

by Solomon Anker

April 9th saw the Presidential Election in Algeria. The final result was an expected easy victory (90%) for the current President Boutiflika, in a country where he and his strong links to the military dominate the country's political elites. Calling Boutiflika a dictator would be a bit harsh: however calling Algeria's elections fully free would also not be totally true, but for the left-wing the results and the state of Algerian politics is quite interesting.

The election came 7 years after the end of the Algerian civil war which saw over 100,000 killed in a brutal conflict between government forces and Islamist militias. For the British media, Algeria is just another Muslim or African country in crisis and few people take any interest except for the marginal Western interests such as terrorist attacks linked to Al Qaeda or issues of immigration.

For the Arabic media the problems of Algeria are also a matter of little interest which they prefer to ignore.

While the Arabic media have a love affair with the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, the crisis in Algeria does not fit the media's fantasy of Arabic-Muslim being the victim of the Christian-Jewish Westerner. Rather Algeria's civil war was Muslim killing Muslim and hence the Arab world likes to ignore it. In addition to that while Israel is official a Jewish country oppressing a Arabic minority, Algeria is officially a Arab country oppressing its Berber minority (whom are 45% of the population), and many in this Berber minority totally reject Algeria as a Arab state and some even call for independence in their Berber region of Kabylie.

The left wing in Britain generally take very little interest in Algeria both nowadays and during its civil war. Yet, Algeria has the potential for having a powerful left-wing movement and the end of the civil war has seen a rise in support for



poster of left candidate louisa hanoune

genuine left-wing ideals. This is mainly due to the brutality of the Algerian Civil War which was a battle between the authoritarian capitalist regime of the 1990s and the Islamist movement who were fighting for Sharia law, and both sides came out with a dirty reputation.

As in all "Arabic" countries there is a great opposition among the population towards the authoritarian regimes such as in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Although in these nations people have traditionally looked towards the Mullahs and the religious establishment as the best opposition to this regime. However, unlike these other "Arabic" countries the Islamic movement of Algeria has lost its reputation due to the civil war and other movements are now coming to strength. This dirty reputation of the Islamists is due to the extreme brutality of their militants during the civil war that saw them committing worse crimes than the government's repression. At worst it saw religious Muslim men with beards and wearing traditional Muslim clothing going to villages that did not sup-

port their side and massacring innocent civilians and then taking the young women as sex slaves.

This had lead to a vacuum in Algerian politics and libertarian and left-wing movements are beginning to gain popularity. The most well known of these movements is the Trotskyist political party called the "Workers' Party" (*Hizb al-Ummal*, in Arabic). Unlike in Britain and the USA where Marxists tend get minor coverage in the media and tiny votes in elections, the Workers' Party is becoming a major movement in the opposition to both the government's capitalist policies and the traditional male chauvinism in Algerian society.

In fact the Workers' Party's leader, Louisa Hanoune became the number two face during the 2009 election campaign (after the President Abdual-Aziz Bouteflika) and won 4.22% of the vote to come second out of six candidates beating the conservative Algerian National Front and the Islamist Movement for National Reform.

The Workers' Party has been important in being an alternative to the Islamic movement which dominates the opposition in virtually all other "Arabic" countries. Regularly Islamist activists hold anti-women's rights demonstrations and the Workers' Party are visible opponents of this chauvinism. In addition to that Hanoune has spoken in favour of Berber rights while the government has traditionally tried to destroy Berber culture via their "Arabisation" programs.

Certainly in the near future, the Workers' Party is far from winning any election and the Algerian working class in not on the verge of getting rid of the authoritarian capitalist regime of Bouteflika. But the potential is there for a powerful left-wing movement in a country which the youth are increasingly bored and fed up with high levels of unemployed, poor housing, while the image of a confident woman like Louisa Hanoune is an inspiration for many women who struggle to survive in Algeria's patriarchal society.

# political platform of the commune

## 1. Our politics

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 are opposed to all forms of oppression of nationalities.

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.

## 2. Our Organisation

We are a network of communists committed to the self-emancipation of the working class, internationalism and opposition to imperialism and all forms of oppression. We reject statist and authoritarian visions of socialism and look instead to the tradition of 'socialism from below', which believes that emancipation can be achieved only through the activity, self-organisation and mobilisation of the working class and oppressed people themselves. Our goal is a communist society, which will abolish the system of wage-labour: a classless society with no state, managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

Communist revolutions cannot succeed without mass self-organisations of workers, and the leadership of organisa-

tions of revolutionary workers and the oppressed. We are a network whose aim is to contribute to the development of such a movement in this country and internationally. We agree to establish ourselves as an organising committee of individual supporters.

We shall function on the basis of consensus or if necessary majority vote: a motion is carried by a vote of more than half (50% plus one) of the people with voting rights in attendance.

## 3. Membership

We welcome the affiliation of any individual who accepts our platform as our basis of unity, supports our activities practically and financially, and accepts these principles of organisation. All members may speak, move motions and vote at meetings. Those who join us in these committees do so freely by an acceptance of these general principles. Others, who are not members, are free to contribute material for the paper and to participate in the discussions of the network.

## 4. A pluralist communist network

The Commune is a paper, a flow of pamphlets, and an organisation of activists with new ideas. Our purpose is to develop and extend these ideas, to promote their discussion and, wherever possible, to act upon them. Our aim is to create a pluralist organisation, a network of committees whose members come together to promote their ideas in an organised manner and to renew them in the practice of the class struggle. A network with full freedom of political discussion and platforms - any individual supporter has the right to form a platform (tendency) to present a viewpoint within the network at any time. We reject sectarian vanguardism and adhere to the principle that communists have no interests separate and apart from those of the working class as a whole.

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