

the★commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below

issue 5, june 2009

£1



speaker axed to quell expenses row—but nothing's changed

it's their parliament, not ours!

editorial of *The Commune*

Just as the financial crisis brought home the inadequacy of the capitalist economy, the scandal of the expenses scam by Members of Parliament brings into question capitalist democracy. The mirage of the 'Mother of all Parliaments' has given way to a view that most workers of this country once adhered to – that of 'the rotten House of Commons'.

In the midst of a deep recession, after even the Metropolitan Police were openly exposed as lying killers at the G20 protests, such a loss of confidence in the key institution of the UK state is a matter of deep concern for the establishment. Amidst the media frenzy *The Times* warned that despite the corruption the "traditions of Parliament have also protected freedom and the rule of law" and now "an important reputation is being jeopardised for the wrong reasons".

In an effort to restore confidence in the House of Commons the establishment is trying to assuage opinion with such measures as de-selecting the exposed MPs, ousting the Speaker and new regulations on allowances. There is even an element of exaggerating "the threat of the fascist BNP" to encourage participation in elections to endorse the establishment parties. But even if the whole parcel of rogues is re-

placed this will solve nothing, for the problem with Parliament is not one of personalities. The question the working class and our labour movement has to ask is whether we should support the rescue of Parliamentary prestige: for just whose freedom does it protect, and in whose interests does it serve?

It is a great lie that the Parliamentary system is the sovereign representative of all citizens of the UK. Just like the discredited banks, Parliament is inseparable from the capitalist system which does not and cannot work in the interests of the majority. Capitalism is a society divided into two main classes – the capitalist class and the working class. The capitalist class is a ruling class, consisting of the wealthy few who own the means of production and make all the key decisions which affect our lives, and it does so on the basis of what will increase its profits and promote its interests. The working class consists of the vast majority of us who must seek work for a wage in order to live. This is an exploitative society: the workers who produce the goods and services do not receive in wages the full value of the products they create. The capitalist class receives or controls the major share of the wealth workers create because it owns and controls the means of production and distribution.

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meet the new boss: the united auto workers' union

by Adam Ford

What do you call a 'union' where the people at the top will directly profit from increasing the exploitation of their 'membership'? Well, if Barack Obama gets his way, you can call it the United Auto Workers.

Yes, in return for a government rescue package, Chrysler executives and UAW bureaucrats have agreed a deal which will have important implications for the class struggle world-wide, and marks a new stage in the liquidation of official trade unions.

In common with the other 'big three' American auto companies (the others being General Motors and Ford), and indeed competitors around the world, Chrysler has suffered from dramatically lower sales in recent years. This situation has been catastrophically worsened by the recession, causing Chrysler and General Motors to seek a bridging loan from the Obama administration. Following the recommendations of the Wall Street-led Presidential Task Force, Obama has given the UAW majority control of Chrysler and a 38% stake in GM, charging it with attacking jobs, wages and benefits.

You did read that right, but perhaps it is worth taking a moment to consider it carefully. Unions, we are told, exist to look after the interests of their workers. True, the leaders normally make a public show of protest, before going into boardrooms and negotiating a stitch-up deal behind their members' backs. But at least it hasn't been the union leaders who have been doing the actual firing, the tearing up of



the new deal: barack obama visits a factory belonging to fallen car giant chrysler, who plan to slash staff with union backing

contracts, and the scrapping of benefits hard won over decades of struggle. Until now, that is.

The United Auto Workers union was born in the mid 1930s, during the depths of the Great Depression. One of the first unions to organise black workers, its first major action was a sit down strike in a Michigan GM factory. Over a period of three months, the workers occupied the facility, shutting management out. In January 1937, police tried to force their way in, but workers met them with fire hoses and missiles.

bolivia: the working class and the morales government

by Enrique Ormachea

Since its foundation, the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB — Bolivia's main trade union federation) has incorporated into its political principles the central points of the Pulacayo Thesis, including the political independence of trade union organisations. Today, the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) government of Evo Morales is trying to take absolute control of the union leaderships, with the objective of converting them into feeble bodies which cover for his ever more blatantly anti-working class and anti-peasant policies.

Much of the trade union leadership has been developing policies openly contrary to the principles of political independence upheld by Bolivian trade unionism, acting against even the resolutions of the last COB Congress.

After more than three years of Evo Morales in government we can say that the October 2003 and May 2005 [general strikes] programmes have been cast aside by MAS, with the complicity of union leaders who have allowed a sort of "nationalisation" of their organisations and who in the name of "the change agenda" have put the brakes on — and put on ice permanently — the needs and demands of the rank-and-file workers.

There are dissident voices

Union leaders in sectors like the La Paz teachers, the Huanuni miners, the Airports Services union and printing workers, among others, have been critical of the COB leadership. The executive secretary of the La Paz city teachers, José Luis Álvarez says that the current government, via perks and pay-offs, has done nothing but corrupt the unions and further still: "it has ended up controlling all the apparatus of the union federation". But the most alarming result is that it has managed to convert the union leaders into a sort of dam holding back all the grassroots organisations' demands for struggle.

In early May printing workers in El Alto decided to pull out of the El Alto COR [regional unit of the COB], arguing that its leaders "have changed this union into an agency of MAS, fumbling over the question of trade union independence".

Another dissident voice is Jaime Ferreira, one of the Casa Obrera y Juvenil representatives in El Alto, attacking the "undermining of the programmatic, ideological and constitutional underpinnings of the COB. These mechanisms based on 'special favours' implemented by the state have sunk roots, and we are heading towards the sort of trade union which forgets about fighting for its members".

From the Pulacayo Thesis to the foundation of the COB

The Pulacayo Thesis argued that the proletariat, even in a backward capitalist country like Bolivia, "is the revolutionary class in society *par excellence*". That same class, in a revolutionary alliance with peasants, artisans and other parts of



the central obrera boliviana: the union federation is increasingly tied to the government

the petit-bourgeoisie, has the aim of carrying out the socialist revolution. Within this framework, it is necessary to fight head-on "against class collaborationism", since collaborating with other classes means an abandonment of the objectives of the working class.

The thesis considered that workers cannot — and must not — solidarise with any government other than that of the workers themselves, since the capitalist state represents the interests of the bourgeoisie. For this reason, it says that when "unions are converted into appendices of the government, they lose their freedom of action and drag the masses down the path of defeat" it also says that trade union organisations must be politically independent "with respect to all sections of the ruling class, left reformism and the government".

In this respect, Álvarez argues that the COB, since its foundation, has worked under the banner of the political principles of the Pulacayo Thesis, decisive in giving meaning to the creation and perspectives of the COB, "most centrally in the sense that it established itself as a working-class organisation with the perspective and possibility of working to transform capitalist society into a socialist one."

The COB is a class organisation

The COB's Founding Congress decided that one of its general principles was "To maintain the political independence — nationally and internationally — of the new organisation of Bolivian workers, building links in solidarity with the workers of the world, in particular those of Latin America."

Indeed, the Organising Statutes of the COB currently in effect count among their principles that "In the struggle for the national and social liberation of Bolivia and the demands of the workers it organises and represents, [the COB] will not tolerate any interests contrary to those of the working class, nor will it renounce any method of struggle or legal means which help its members."

It also reiterates among its principles "class proportional representation as to guarantee the hegemony of the proletariat in the structures and leadership bodies of the Central

After several hours and several charges, the police withdrew. Eventually, GM gave in and officially recognised the UAW, which saw its membership soar from 30,000 to 500,000 in just one year. The working class had forced a significant concession from the owners.

Today, the UAW has fewer members than in 1938. They pay their dues to a bureaucracy which already lived very well before the latest deals. In 2008, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger took home \$162,000, including expenses. He and his accomplices now stand to profit handsomely from the blood, sweat and tears of the UAW members, if they vote to accept the deal/ultimatum.

Union bureaucrats around the world sometimes speak against 'excesses' of the system, but the truth is they themselves profit from it. Separated from the coalface by chasms of privilege, they live parasitically on workers' dues. In an era of economic globalisation, they remain tied to the nation state, and campaign to set workers in different countries against each other, with reactionary campaigns to buy American and buy British etc. Faced with a historic economic collapse, the like of which has not been seen since the times that formed the UAW, Gettelfinger and his cronies have blazed a trail for trade union tops around the world.

In their fight against Ford, sacked UK Visteon workers have already come up against bureaucratic backstabbing. If workers are to successfully defend their interests in the coming period, they will have to reject their leadership, their nationalist poison and even the profit system itself.

Obrera Boliviana", arguing for the "independence of the COB as a class organisation with regard to the government, political parties or other forms of sectional pressure amongst its ranks..."

Reassert the October programme

For its part, the Political Declaration of the 14th Ordinary Congress of the COB, taking place when MAS was already in government, (i) expressed the need to "... struggle for the programmes of the October 2003 and May-June 2005 [general strikes]", understood to mean "the nationalisation without compensation of the gas reserves, the recuperation of all natural resources and the abrogation of all neo-liberal laws and decrees"; (ii) considered it necessary to strengthen federation structures such as the Centrales Obreras of each department of Bolivia and the COB, "the basic organisations of the class".

The same document established that "preserving our class political independence we will defend ourselves against the divisionism the government is trying — and will try — to use to win ground for certain groups' interests, favouring — deliberately or not — the economic interests of the multinationals and imperialist capitalism".

On 17th September 2008 the executive secretary of COB, Petro Montes, signed a deal with President Evo Morales in the name of the union, backing and calling for the defense of "the revolutionary change agenda" and rebutting the [right-wing] opposition governors. However, in Álvarez's eyes, this alliance has only served to allow the MAS government "to defend in law the existence of private property, the large agricultural estates and the continuation of this capitalist society which organises the economy so the bosses and multinationals can make huge profits by exploiting and stealing our natural resources".

No more concessions

For the former executive secretary of the Central Obrera Departamental in Oruro, Miguel Zubieta, the task of the COB leadership is to re-orient and take up the objectives outlined in the October [2003 general strike's] programme, (i) establishing collective workers' control and (ii) taking back the natural resources for the Bolivian people, amongst other promises Morales is not fulfilling.

Álvarez believes that to reclaim the organisation for the workers it is of vital importance to "expel representatives of the government and the right from the COB (...), since it should be a union organisation allowing us to fight for better living conditions and jobs".

This also means that workers have the task of reclaiming the class struggle principles of Bolivian trade unionism and making sure their organisations are politically independent from both the bosses' organisations and parties and the — somewhat reformist — MAS government, which constantly makes concessions to the right at the expense of workers, peasants and indigenous people.

the commune

editorial: let this rotten house of commons sink

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The establishment seeks to present the relationship of the “political system” and the “economic system” as if they are separate: this a view presented by Gordon Brown and David Cameron led Hansard Society, in it's book *Democracy and Capitalism*. It is a deception, Parliament is not separate from this system which operates according to the profit motive, and it is not neutral but part of this system which creates an ongoing struggle between the two classes.

Parliamentary democracy is not somehow 'neutral' but part of the system of class struggle. This is most evident in the fact that democracy does not extend to the most important sphere of society – the economy. Whether in its private or state capitalist forms this remains a tyranny run by unelected bureaucrats and managers.

This is most evident in the fact that Parliamentary democracy does not extend to the most important sphere of society – the economy. Whether in its private or state capitalist forms this remains a tyranny run by unelected bureaucrats and managers. Every other institution in society is also run without democratic control whatsoever, the Police, the Army, the Civil Service, the media, hospitals etc, are run by the same principle – appointment from above. Of the mechanisms of the state, the House of Lords, the Privy Council and immense Crown Powers remain unelected and unaccountable.

Far from Parliament safeguarding freedom for ‘the people’ it perpetuates this social system and the property and privilege of the ruling class. The capitalist class consolidated their control of Parliament in the Victorian era, the old English aristocracy amalgamating with the new industrial capitalists. The Houses of Parliament have belonged to the upper classes for centuries, whilst the working class only secured full voting rights in the 20th century; the ruling class have never surrendered their dominance of the political machinery of the state.

This influence of business over Parliament and government itself is no secret; the organisations of capitalists openly advertise this fact. The Confederation of British Industry ‘the UK’s leading employers’ organisation; which seeks “to uphold the market system” has daily contact with every level of government and senior civil servants. The CBI’s chief economist is a member of the panel which advises the Chancellor on the Budget. The Chamber of Commerce, which describes itself as ‘one of the UK’s most powerful business affinity groups’, claims equally strong influence on government, ministers, officials and MPs, whilst the Institute of Directors boasts a string of successes in its objective to “exert influence in the corridors of power and to advance the case for business in government”. The New Labour government has regularly given unelected CBI and other corporate leaders posts in the Government.

"this democracy is but a manufactured form of consensus to ensure the preservation of a system which allows a minority class to rule over the majority of us"

This whole machinery of control by business is camouflaged under the cloak of parliamentary democracy: after all the government is elected in free elections, isn't it? The very fact that fewer and fewer people bother to vote is symptomatic of just how inadequate this democracy actually is. The timing of elections is not based on the needs of society but chosen by the government when it best suits its chances of winning.

The participation of the vast majority of the population is reduced to voting for a Party candidate every four or five years: these candidates are not chosen by their community but generally imposed by their Party leadership or manipulated into position. Parliamentary democracy offers no means by which electors can control these MPs: once elected there is nothing to stop them breaking their pre-election promises. The Tories, New Labour and Liberal Democrats all support the capitalist system and are totally undemocratic: their 'conferences' are but rallies whose policies are generally ignored when drawing up election manifestos.

The very existence of free elections has to be seen in the context of a situation in which as a result of the immense



not the 'parliament of the people', but the executive committee of the ruling class

power it derives from its rule of the economy, the capitalist class is in a position to exert tremendous influence over the ideas of society and mould public opinion in its favour. Capitalist ideas dominate society at large, perpetuated by bodies from politicians to the church and capitalists such as Rupert Murdoch who own and control the media; they even fund the main parties, whether directly or via donors. In the era of global capitalism this has taken on obscene proportions with the principles and methods of the advertising industry to convince people to buy commodities having moved into the realms of politics. Electoral success of those political parties which perform a service for capitalism is dependent for success as much on ‘political technicians’ or ‘spin doctors’ as their actual policies.

Once elected MPs do not in practice control the government: instead it is they who are under the direct control of the government through a mixture of patronage and pressure. It is not the constituents who are represented but the state political machine itself. There is a further link between the MPs and capitalism, not only in terms of the ideas held by the majority of them but in direct material benefits through their second incomes from business. Two-thirds of Tory MPs, over a third of Liberal Democrats and a fifth of New Labour MPs hold second jobs. This ranges from law firms for the private equity industry to directors of banking groups. The Tories, who are nurturing an image of cleaning up the House of Commons, under Cameron have taken £14 million from the City and bankers.

The ‘Mother of all Parliaments’ is a sham, not just because it reduces the level of participation to voting every few years for which the party can administer capitalism, or that it is a gravy train, but because this democracy is but a manufactured form of consensus to ensure the preservation of a system which allows minority class to rule over the majority of us.

The scandal of MPs’ allowances is a symptom of the decadence which the Parliamentary system entered long ago; the labour movement and working class as a whole has no interest in supporting the efforts to revitalise and “restore confidence” in Parliament. Its defenders from the Tories to Labourite socialists fall back on the lamentable argument that there is no alternative.

But there is a viable alternative: it is one which the pundits who wrote of the relevance of Marx during the ‘credit crunch’ are silent about as regards the Parliamentary scandal. It has been tried and tested, and needs to be renewed for the 21st century: the communist alternative of communal self-management, an extensive participatory democracy.

The communism being advocated has nothing in common with the totalitarian state-socialist or state-capitalist systems as exist in China and North Korea. It began to take shape for a brief time in the Paris Commune of 1871, and in the early period of the Soviet republics such as in Russia,

Ukraine, Hungary and Germany during the revolutionary wave of 1917-1921. Workers began the communist reconstruction of society from below: they ended the false separation between economics and politics with the close co-operation of organisations of workers’ self-management in a system of communal self-government.

In contrast to Parliamentary democracy which conceals the class character of its state, communal self-government openly acknowledges its working class character whilst any remnant of the old state power remains in existence. The communist revolution provides new forms of working class democracy: historical experience has seen numerous examples of such bodies as soviets or councils of workers’ deputies, essentially democratic assemblies created by workers in the course of their struggles. In contrast to capitalist democracy, communal self-government will involve direct participation of the great majority of the population in the running of society. The communist revolution we advocate pushes up from below through the workers’ own organisations: it is not a coup by an elite, nor do we pursue power through a Parliament designed to exclude us from effective control of our lives. The system advocated by communists draws on the principles of the Paris Commune that all officials are subject to recall by their electors, and all public service is to be performed at the average worker’s wage.

Whereas parliamentary democracy is restricted to a fictitious popular participation in the management of the state, the communal system with its principle of the elections of all organs of power from the lowest to the highest, with a method of election of representatives which allows their removal when the majority who elected them desire it. The negative features of parliamentarianism will be eliminated – the detachment of representatives from the electors, their irrevocability, the passive participation of the populace in political life. Communists aim to create a system which abolishes the division between the legislative, executive and judicial, communism will replace this with a united self-government from top to bottom.

The political rights and freedoms proclaimed at present are merely formal – freedom of assembly, association and press. In practice the ruling class has always restrained these activities and their development to prevent their use by workers in their class struggle. Communists advocate a system of self-government where these freedoms can be realised in full. Our goal is not less democracy, but its extension to such a scale that we transcend the state itself: no body would exist which was superior to – or could control – those of the workers’ own organisations.

This vision of communism is not utopian: the potential to create such self-government of the workers themselves already exists. It involves winning our movement to developing this goal within its struggles. If part of that struggle ever involved communists entering Parliament, it could only be to use it as a platform to attack capitalism itself, as opposed to rescuing an institution past its sell by date.

Lessons of the Visteon struggle

by Joe Thorne

When I went to the Visteon factory in Enfield, North London, on Sunday May 3rd, much had changed since my previous visit. Following a threat to picket out the Bridgend engine plant, Ford had conceded an offer including a full 52 weeks of redundancy pay. Workers at the Enfield and Basildon factories voted to accept the offer on May 1st, International Workers Day; one month after they had occupied the plant on April Fools. While I was at the Enfield factory on May 3rd we heard that Belfast had voted acceptance, in their case by 147-34.

Immediately upon my arrival that day, I was greeted by two workers who proceeded to tell me how overwhelmed they were with the solidarity they have received from all quarters. They told how they have learned in the past month that laws are made by and for the owners, and against the workers. They explained to me that what was needed was for the workers themselves to organise society on a new basis, and make the laws directly, being quite specific that this did not mean getting other, “better” representatives to do so for us, but doing it ourselves. They told me that they’d discovered their own power as workers, and that they wanted to continue the struggle against the government and corporations. For them, the first step would be to organise for change in their own union, which they described as having been something between practically useless and an actual obstacle to them in their struggle. They told me that they’d known, in a way, that these things were true before, but the struggle had placed these things “in front of our face”.

Though it was present in these two workers in strongly distilled and sharply expressed form, development in class consciousness can be found amongst the body of former Visteon workers who have participated in the occupation and picketing (an estimated 70-80 of the 210 workers at Enfield have been involved since the occupation). While it is undeniably true that most picketers wanted most of all for the struggle to be over and to be able to go back to their lives; and also true that most had not drawn conclusions as developed as those of the two I talked to, elements of their views were to be found amongst all workers I spoke to.

The real deal?

In order to get a grip on the present situation, it is necessary to understand that there was some uncertainty over what exactly the workers were voting for when they accepted the deal, and a significant and growing number were unhappy with it; indicating that in retrospect they should have waited for something written down in black and white.

Why did the workers vote for such a deal? “It was the euphoria, the euphoria in the room at the time after we heard 52 weeks was incredible.” Another worker added, “If the vote was taken now... I don’t know if we’d vote for it. I don’t think we would” – though others did not express things in such strong terms. There are two outstanding issues:

1. The pensions. There has been no deal on pensions, which leaves the workers with only the government’s statutory pension protection scheme payouts. Ford/Visteon workers have a contracted retirement age of 58, whereas the government scheme only kicks in at 65.
2. Incorporation of the shift allowance into the 52 week redundancy package. According to some, the 52 weeks is only payable at the ‘day’ rate which all workers were on at the time of retiring, while until a few months ago, many were on two or three shift rotations at higher rates.

The ballot, carried out after a mass meeting apparently had some peculiar features. Next to ballot boxes in the plant, the ‘offer’ had been written out in biro. None of the workers I spoke to had a copy of the text, or knew how to get one. There was even disagreement about its content. Some thought that the offer did not include compensation commensurate with the higher wages of those who had done shift work for years up until the months prior to redundancy, while a couple of workers were sure that the biro notice had “+ including shift allowance” scrawled at the bottom. Since then, it seems that the shift allowance has not been included; and there are some reports, unconfirmed as yet, that part of the deal was for Unite to receive a cool £500 per sacked worker!

The role of the union

On my first visit, I noted two things in respect of the union:

1. A regional Unite official spoke strongly in support of the strikers. “We will not be found wanting”, he said, adding that if necessary the union “will support them financially”.
2. There was no obvious sign of a fissure between the workers and the union.

Since then, Unite has been found wanting, and a fissure has opened up between the workers and the union. One worker

told me: “It wasn’t done right from day one. The only time we’ve seen officials here is when the TV cameras were here. I haven’t seen a penny from the union. Apparently Unite gave £11,000 to us across the three sites — but I don’t know where it went.

“We said to him at the start... we said to Kevin [the convenor], “go independent, don’t depend on the union”... Kevin ... he is frightened of officials ... he does what he is told. He went to New York, but didn’t attend any meetings. On the 17th March, there is a secret meeting in London — but he wasn’t in there. He came back ... he’d spent all the time in the bar, he said “I can’t tell you anything, I’ve got to wait for the officials”. The next day Brian Harris from Unite came, what did he tell us? He told us nothing.”

These complaints were common: there was a universal recognition that workers had fought under their own initiative and resources. Objections were often expressed in similar terms to the above; relating to the lack of information, the lack of practical help from officials, and the union’s acquiescence in the presentation of a deal which has not even been written down, and parts of which have apparently been communicated by phone, not even face to face. As far as the exclusion of the convenor from direct negotiations goes, compare the very similar tactics used by Unite during the Lindsey strikes, and the more confident response from workers — covered in a previous article in *The Commune*.

There is no sense in pretending that only one analysis abounds among the workers; or that the workers have a developed a consistent left-critique of the union form. Equally, there is clearly a real layer of respect for the site convenor, and no doubt about his commitment, but a simultaneous frustration with what seems to some like remoteness. Now, in any dispute, there are always discontented voices; it does not follow that these represent a consensus. And in the absence of open organising meetings, there will always be soil for rumour and resentment to develop. So we have to be careful about drawing conclusions too quickly. However, a clear contradiction had emerged between the needs of the struggle and the ossified form of the official union. The convenor was caught in this tension.

"I asked one woman if in retrospect she thought that the official advice was accurate in its legal or practical substance. “Of course it fucking wasn’t”, she said. The official union was actively involved in demobilising the occupation."

By the by, one extremely odd fact has gone unremarked in most reports. There was a Visteon workers Social Club fund which contained an astonishing £90,000; built up by contributions of 30p a week by hundreds of workers over 30 years or so. It had two signatories, the former convenor, and another worker who was on holiday at the time of the sackings. Both signatures were needed to access the money, but the second worker proved to be uncontactable from the beginning of the dispute until last week. Workers I talked to were fairly sanguine about this fact, despite its apparently significant potential to provide hardship funds for picketers. These workers thought that the funds should now be made available to other workers in struggle.

The decision to abandon the Enfield occupation

Though Unite officials have apparently made some attempt to deny this in retrospect, workers I spoke to were clear that Unite had successfully persuaded them to leave the occupation by stressing the risk of criminal charges for all concerned, and consequent greater difficulty in finding a job, not to mention the potential violence of an eviction.

Workers voted to leave the occupation because, they told me, at the time they were tired, and susceptible to the Unite scaremongering. In fact, it has proved more tiring to keep pickets going at three different gates, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I asked one woman if in retrospect she thought that the official advice was accurate in its legal or practical substance. “Of course it fucking wasn’t”, she said. The official union was actively involved in demobilising the occupation.

It has been suggested by some that, unlike in Enfield, the Belfast occupiers would be able to hold out due to the political support of Sinn Féin, the ruling party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the greater volatility of the Belfast working class. One solidarity activist I spoke to was clear that while these were potentially significant factors, it would have been quite possible for the Enfield occupiers to defend their occupation. For one thing, the occupiers at Prisme in Dundee were able to hold out for seven weeks without criminal

charges or physical threat. For another, the much discussed possibility of Enfield convenor Kevin Nolan being jailed was never a serious option for the bosses. If Nolan was jailed — and he declared he was willing to be — then it would have provoked a strong reaction from the trade union movement and the public at large. It would have forced Unite to get involved on a whole different level, possibly dragged in the broader trade union movement, and (most importantly) probably provoked action at other Ford sites.

Sometimes, our enemies are more aware of our strength, and the fragility of their own compacts, than we are.

Spreading the struggle

In an earlier piece, I offered an analysis of what was needed, in terms of solidarity, for the strike to win: “the best hope for any dispute lies in its capacity to spread, and keep spreading, industrial action. This is why I believe contact with other Ford and Visteon workers is so vital.”

This analysis has been broadly vindicated — it was spreading the struggle that proved most important. However, my previous article was mistaken about the avenues along which the struggle should be spread. I focussed on the possibility of workers’ solidarity from Dagenham, Jaguar-Land Rover (‘JLR’) Halewood, Southampton, or the factory in Hungary; that is the sites which had been receiving Visteon products from the Enfield factory (and probably the other two UK factories as well). This turned out to be mistaken.

Bridgend was chosen for sound strategic reasons. First, it is easy to picket: one road in and out, which ten people could block (in contrast, it is thought that one hundred would have been needed for Dagenham). Second, it is the only UK site to produce the engine for the Fiesta, which is Ford’s best-selling and most profitable car. Third, the shop stewards of the articulated lorry fleet at Bridgend (directly employed by Ford) had approached shop stewards at Visteon and made it clear that they would not cross a picket line — they did not even have to be asked. Each site was ready to send ten people to stay in Bed and Breakfasts in Bridgend in three day shifts to maintain a rolling picket. The stage was therefore set for a confrontation in which the workers were strongly placed. In most industrial or distribution/retail enterprises, articulated lorry drivers are the most powerful section of the workforce: so it proved in the oil refinery tanker drivers’ strikes last year, so it proved here. In contrast to my rather narrow analysis of the opportunities for spreading the struggle, the workers disregarded the Visteon supply chain and aimed directly for Ford’s most vulnerable point. The dealership pickets no doubt galvanised the campaign, and put a few warning shots over Ford’s bows, but it was the threat of the Bridgend picket, and the active solidarity of the Ford fleet drivers, that won. The workers agreed to keep up their pickets until the money actually reached their accounts, but the Belfast factory occupation finally ended on May 18th, as *The Commune* was going to press, on the understanding that the money would have been transferred, by Ford, into the account of Visteon UK.

What we have learned

This struggle holds a number of lessons.

- Don’t rely on the union to do anything — whether organising action or spreading information.
 - Hold regular, mass meetings to hold officials to account, take decisions, and ensure that everyone has all the information they need
 - Don’t vote on an offer that hasn’t been set down in black and white, and put in front of every member
 - Don’t vote on a deal in the heat of the moment: take time to assess the balance of forces
 - Politically, the state is very wary of effecting violent mass evictions on occupying workers with broad support (the Belfast occupation shows this).
 - Diffuse solidarity in keeping up workers’ confidence, and building their material and human resources for campaigning is indispensable
 - Under no circumstances accept that workers’ directly elected representatives be either excluded from negotiations, or bound to keep anything secret
 - Spreading the struggle is the key to victory
- Local supporters have done outstanding practical solidarity work. Perhaps, in future, we need to work out how to communicate the risks of the union demobilising the struggle early, and work to inoculate against that risk. A regular picketers’ bulletin may be something we could look at in future.

If the energy industry construction strikes were the first great convulsion of the crisis in Britain, the Visteon struggle is the second. Its outcomes are not yet clear. A full balance sheet is yet to be drawn up. Let us learn the lessons. The third may not be long in coming.

where next for the unions?

by Steve Ryan

Recent events covered by *The Commune* such as the wild cat strikes and Visteon would indicate a surge in militancy amongst workers. However, look a bit deeper and there are real problems emerging in the trade union movement.

Both the wild cats and Visteon took the unions by surprise, but more telling was the lack of concrete support given by the union leaders and general union movement.

Also, as we sink into the deepest recession since the 30s the reaction of the Trades Union Congress was to produce a booklet on how to spread your debts and write CVs! This has been echoed round the movement with unions faced with redundancies accepting them or negotiating wage cuts.

Even in supposed left-led unions the response has been hesitant. The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), for example, are still dithering over essential action over the pay freeze, and still have not reacted to massive job cuts and more to come.

The problem is that at the same time — while the picture is patchy — many union members have been willing to fight back, as well illustrated by the aforementioned actions and consistent strike votes in unions such as PCS, railworkers' union RMT and the National Union of Teachers .

The lack of action is starting to tell. The recent PCS NEC elections produced only a 9% turnout, for example.

So what is the answer?

Clearly the mood of workers does need to be tapped into. But this means going beyond the usual structures. Workers cannot rely on union leaders, no matter how 'left', to deliver: certainly not without massive pressure put upon them.

This means that communists in the unions must start to argue and debate with workers about the recession on a number of levels

ê That there should be no redundancies. Open the books and where suggested, occupy.

ê No pay freezes or cuts. Rather, base pay claims on what workers need — make the bosses pay.

ê No sell outs over pensions — there is plenty of money to fund pension schemes.

This means arguing across narrow craft lines. It means getting involved in Trades Councils and positive initiatives that link up shop stewards. It means working with unemployed groups and within communities. It also means starting to re-



pcs leader mark serwotka let down initial high hopes: we need more than just 'left' bureaucrats

build shop floor confidence in all unions. Workplace bulletins strongly arguing for the above but also putting it into an overtly political context — around capitalism — is vital.

It means building new structures outside, or if viable inside, the now tired Broad Lefts. Simple electoralism is outdated.

It means arguing for the widest democracy. Union officials must be elected and on a workers' wage. The example of John Moloney doing so well in the PCS deputy general secretary elections demonstrates that workers respond to these arguments.

All strikes to be democratically controlled by strike committees. Build confidence to by-pass union leaders and officials where they are acting against the class interests of workers.

Much of this is recognisable from the old Rank and Files. But that doesn't make it wrong. Indeed there is a need to patiently rebuild shop stewards' networks and rank and files but with a more overt class politics. Workers' self-activity and control of their own struggles is vital, otherwise the seeds of a meaningful fight back will not grow, smothered by a new bureaucracy.

organising our network

by Joe Thorne

On Saturday 9th May members of The Commune met for our second national 'aggregate'.

As a relatively new organisation, we are organising on the basis of meetings attended by all members able to make it, held every three months. As our organisation develops, we may develop a more formal structure, but that is how it works at the moment.

There were twelve of us at the meeting from London, Coventry, Sheffield, Stevenage and Bristol — twice the number that attended the first meeting three months ago. A further six were unable to make it, including members from Blackpool and Wrexham.

We had a broad political discussion on the crisis, and the working class resistance to it, before moving on to discuss how we organise. We affirmed that the network we were building should provide for full freedom of discussion, and presentation of individual points of view, both within and outside the network — no one has to give any 'party line'.

It's clear that we need to get better organised in London, where we have several members, to ensure that the burden of

work falls as evenly as possible, and we agreed to institute a monthly organising meeting and make our public forums monthly rather than every three weeks in order to keep the schedule manageable. Outside London, The Commune activists are generally working to develop a space in which ideas or activity outside the traditional left can be developed — although not necessarily under The Commune's banner.

Another idea discussed was that of members from London going up to help those in another area with an event, if they would find it helpful.

We also talked about our publications, and reaffirmed the importance of producing the paper — as a way of spreading ideas, organising, and compelling us to present events in a rounded but accessible manner. In respect of the latter, we agreed that we had some work to do in terms of making some of our material more accessible. We need to sort out a proper system for subscribing to the paper; and it was suggested we could be better at including material on contemporary 'news' developments.

The Commune continues as a project to develop a pluralist communist network, open to all who share our basis of agreement (see back page), and separated by a wide gulf from the culture and assumptions of the traditional left.

the commune's activities around britain...

london

The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital and also have our own activities.

We have a reading group every three weeks on 'communism from below' and monthly forums on various issues under the title 'capitalism and the working class today'.

Join our email announcements list at <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommune-london>

Email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com or phone David on 07595 245494 for more info.

west midlands

We participate in the Coventry Radical Network, whose next meeting is on Monday 22nd June at 7.30pm at the Friends' Meeting House, Hill Street, Coventry.

The topic is "Twenty-Five Years after the Miners' Strike. Lessons for the Unions today" — The speaker is NUM activist Dave Douglass.

If you're interested in the meeting or our network, call Dave on 02476 450027

wrexham

We are planning a series of meetings 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

lancashire

If you're in Blackpool, Preston or the surrounding area, get in touch with our comrades via the network's email address uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

south yorkshire

Activists in South Yorkshire interested in The Commune should get in touch with Barry in Sheffield on 07543 652629

bristol (and everywhere else)

If you're interested in activities taking place in Bristol, contact us via uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

The Commune also have a 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>

All correspondence should be sent to: The Commune, 2nd Floor, 145-157 St John Street, London EC1V 4PY

our pamphlets

As well as this paper, The Commune has published a series of pamphlets. Each costs £1 + 50p postage and packing — write to uncaptiveminds@gmail.com or use the info on the form on the back page.

no. 7, March 2009: The revolution delayed — a decade of Hugo Chávez. Charles Reeve interviews the *El libertario* group in Caracas

no. 6, February 2009: The meaning of communism today, by Francois Chesnais

no. 5, December 2008: The movement for workers' councils in Germany — a 1938 GIK pamphlet

no. 4, November 2008: The economic crisis: an interview with Andrew Kliman

no. 3, October 2008: Strategy for industrial struggle — a 1971 *Solidarity* pamphlet with an introduction by Chris Kane

no. 2, October 2008: Nationalisation or workers' management? A collection of articles by *Solidarity*, The Institute for Workers' Control and others

no. 1, September 2008: Bolivia: class struggle and social crisis. Documents of the Bolivian workers' movement in English translation

the eu elections and the bnp

by David Broder

The Times has carried several articles recently predicting that the recent outcry at the “MPs’ expenses scandal” has boosted the chances of the British National Party winning at least one seat in the European Parliament in the June 4th elections. Most people can only be sickened by this prospect – and indeed the extra revenue and organising power this would afford the BNP – but in a sense the election results will merely reflect the ‘already existing’ organising strength of the different parties. Of course, at election time we ought to be concerned not only by the growth of the BNP, which has expanded ten-fold in the last decade, but also by the much greater – continuing – strength of the Tories and New Labour, who already have both the (state) power and determination to attack migrants.

Typically of the media (both corporate and leftist) *The Times* devotes great attention to all the activities of the BNP – wholly unwarranted by its size or power – much as the press swallowed the far-right group’s own ludicrous claims to have played a leading role in January’s Lindsey Oil Refinery wild-cat strikes. The paper fears the BNP playing on “anti-establishment” anger and widespread disaffection with the mainstream parties. Editorial pieces over the last week have extolled the virtues of Parliamentary democracy and pointed to the criminal records, violent past and sloppy attendance record of BNP councillors. A May 11th editorial piece encouraging voter turnout to stop the group securing an MEP commented:

“To alert voters to the reality of the BNP, the main parties need to make their own case and persuade people that, no matter what they think about the state of politics in general, the BNP is worse than just useless, it is bad. A vote for the BNP is a vote for extremism and intolerance.”

Of course, it is no surprise that *The Times*, the long-standing newspaper of record and ‘authoritative’, ‘serious’ voice of the elite, should defend the established order of ‘normal’ politics and ‘mainstream’ parties against ‘extremists’ (surely it would have the same attitude towards a sizeable communist alternative to the establishment). So why does the traditional left’s “anti-fascism” look so similar?

A May 16th *Socialist Worker* article reporting on their anti-BNP activism remarks: “As Peter Hain, the former Labour cabinet member and co-founder of the Anti Nazi League (ANL), warned last week, “Winning European seats would secure the BNP an unprecedented platform and entitle it to draw down hundreds of thousands of Euros from Brussels to indirectly buttress their full-time personnel and organisation.” He called for the building of a broad-based campaign to stop the Nazis. The BNP leader Nick Griffin has attempted to make his Nazi organisation appear “respectable.”

Sadly, it is not uncharacteristic of *Socialist Worker* to quote the slimy career politician Hain – whose aim is to stop the crumbling of the New Labour vote – since its front Unite Against Fascism also boasts amongst its supporters David Cameron and Sir Teddy Taylor (a leading member of the Monday Club, the most right-wing faction of the Conservative Party). Similarly, Hope Not Hate leaflets depict Sir Alan Sugar saying racism is bad for business, as if most people could identify with someone like him.

Obviously the BNP’s racist platform is far more reactionary than even the Tories’, and their becoming a major party would be disastrous. But if, as *Socialist Worker* rightly points out, the BNP are benefiting from “the impact of the recession [and] the meltdown in Labour’s support”, then what sense does it make to insist that the people disaffected with Labour and the Conservatives ought to vote for these ‘normal’ parties? ‘You’re right to be angry, but stick to the devil you know!’ The BNP’s answers to the recession are based not only on racist scapegoating very similar to that in the *Daily Mail* and the columns of Richard Littlejohn, but also a protectionist, anti-privatisation and pro-manufacturing populism; UAF organises on the basis of being “apolitical”, which is one and the same thing as refusing to challenge the establishment. This type of “anti-fascism” is in fact the hallmark of union bureaucrats who want to make the easiest possible “left” posture without doing anything to counter the BNP’s increasing ability to pick up “protest votes”: indeed, it quite explicitly presents the left and labour movement as an ally of the established parties who screw people over.

In a recent debate on Tommy Boyd’s radio show with deputy BNP leader Simon Darby, the SWPer and UAF organiser Weyman Bennett laughably refused to respond to Darby’s anti-bankers rhetoric over the economic crisis with any political alternative, instead simply repeating that the BNP were

“Nazis” – not a “normal” political group – which “mainstream parties” refuse to debate. When it was implied that Bennett was a leftist, he said that UAF were supported by “David Cameron and leading elements in the Labour Party”! It is not just the SWP, however: other Trotskyist groups who also know that a large proportion of the one million people likely to vote BNP on June 4th are disaffected Labour supporters, tired of the openly pro-business careerists in the Cabinet, are nonetheless calling on people to vote for New Labour – that’s the existing Labour Party, the one which has not been and will not be “reclaimed” by “the unions” and whose European election candidates are a collection of anonymous Blairite hacks. The problem is not just that this will not work in stopping the BNP winning a seat, but that in a general sense it serves to discredit the left by association: it is just as bad as saying “vote for anyone to stop the Nazis”, and for the same reasons.

For want of any movement which poses a communist alternative to capitalist crisis, can it be any surprise that many people fall for the Old Labour-ish, protectionist and statist economic plans of the BNP? An article in *The Times* on May 12th about a large meeting with Nick Griffin speaking in a Barnsley pub reported that “Mr Griffin expresses sympathy for the 1984 miners strike, triggered by the closure of the Cortonwood colliery in Barnsley. He denounces the Government’s privatisation programme. He accuses Labour of crushing ordinary people to ensure maximum profit for its corporate financiers. “It has sold out,” he thunders. “The old Labour Party is dead. Long live the new party for British workers — the BNP.”” *The Times* featured a photo of the people at the meeting, many of whom — it says — 25 years ago were striking miners. *Socialist Worker* (May 16th) dismisses the crowd as “Nazis”.

In his debate with Darby, questioned by the presenter on what solutions he would counterpose to the BNP’s slogans for the economic crisis, Bennett embarrassingly replied that UAF isn’t a political party so has no answers – and then returned to the theme that the BNP would not be able to “restore the system to equilibrium”. Restoring the system to “equilibrium” is hardly a tantalising prospect for most workers, and it is a testament to the lack of openness and democracy in the SWP that they had no public debate before changing their main slogan on resisting the recession from “we won’t pay for their crisis!” to “restore the equilibrium, now!”

Many of the traditional left’s other means of criticising the BNP are also rather questionable. For example, calling the BNP – or even more counter-productive, the hundreds of thousands of BNP voters – “Nazis” is hardly likely to do much to change the minds of those who do vote for them, who are surely sufficiently numerous as not to be written off. Such chants may strike them not merely as shrill, but rather odd, given the party’s heavy reliance in their propaganda on the World War II theme, including nostalgia for wartime national unity, pictures of Spitfires, Winston Churchill and the ‘British bulldog’, and indeed the fact that they often stand old war veterans as candidates. The “Nazi” claim itself also chimes in with the rather peculiar national habit of constant referencing of “the war”, the final triumph of Empire evoked in a thousand *Sun* headlines and England football fans’ costumes. Seeking to steal the WWII-nostalgia thunder, the June 21st 2008 *Socialist Worker*, a special issue for an anti-BNP demo in central London, carried a long article about an Imperial War Museum exhibition on West Indian people fighting for the Allies. Simon Assaf’s priceless piece made no reference to the imperialist character of the USA-UK-USSR war effort, nor the terrible exploitation in the West Indies, instead pointing to how even colonial subjects dug deep “Many people in the British empire took part in raising money to help the war effort – in addition to the extra taxes, raw materials and food that flowed from the colonies to support the war”. (“Flowed”!)

On the same note, there is even now an anti-BNP website called “There’s Nothing British about the BNP”. This tactic – stealing the BNP’s thunder by reappropriating British “traditions” – is also evidenced in the “No2EU” campaign organised by the *Morning Star*, the Socialist Party, other smaller Leon Trotsky fan clubs and elements of the RMT bureaucracy. This campaign’s electoral material blames the European Union for neo-liberal policies and demanding economic independence for the British state. Often we have criticised those who call on trade union leaders to set up a state-socialist Labour Party mark II, thinking about initiatives such as Respect: but “No2EU” is a much better example, copying as it does the worst traits of the Labour Party, not only nationalism but also a complete lack of democratic decision making and lack of any connection between the political

expression of the union bureaucrats and the concrete or “industrial” concerns of the rank-and-file and their battles with management and the authorities. It can barely even claim to have any answers to the recession.

That said, much unlike both the real Labour Party and the BNP, which from the inception stood in election after election, consistently hammering away and gradually building strength from a low base, “No2EU”, Respect, Left List, Socialist Alliance, SLP etc. represent the left groups’ remarkable tendency to present a differently named party composed of a different collection of organisations at every single major election—a sure sign of a lack of serious strategy.

As racists and radical right-wingers, the BNP are a threat to migrants and the labour movement, but not so much in that they have councillors and deputies in parliaments – by the measure of legislative and state power they are nothing like the threat the main ruling class parties are – but rather with their use of violence and intimidation. Although the BNP is not primarily an Italian Fascist Party-type militia, there is of course some relationship between the overall strength of the party and the level of violence its members employ, and undoubtedly in a broader sense racist attacks will be on the increase during the recession. It is highly important that communities and the labour movement organise to counter all violent attacks and to keep the streets free of gangs of thugs – stopping the problem rather than just ritually denouncing “the Nazis” in print. Chris Kane’s piece in issue 4 of *The Commune* made a strong case for why we also have to organise to stop police violence, as well as the racist use of ‘sus’ laws and the constant intimidation of Black youth.

But because of what the BNP has become – still racist, but having made a “respectable turn”; which hundreds of thousands of people tired of Labour either vote for or give passive support to; and which is now larger than the far left – we have no choice but to combat it on its own territory and counter its arguments. “On principle” refusal to engage with the types of argument the BNP make in their leaflets – which are not *only* ideological racism, but do relate this scapegoating in some way to real grievances caused by cuts, privatisation and the capitalist crisis more broadly – means abandoning their voters to them, giving up without a fight. In fact, it is over precisely these questions that the labour movement has to organise. The BNP could be on course to win as many as 1 million votes in the June 4th poll: but that does not mean that there are 1 million little Hitlers goose-stepping around Britain’s shopping centres. In fact, the BNP is two-faced, has very little to say for itself and is a bundle of contradictions, as its “organisers’ language discipline” article on its website shows:

“Rule #8: When addressing a specific audience, arguments for our policies should always be couched in language calculated to be relevant to their interests. Do not bore a workingmen’s audience with those parts of our ideology that derive from old-school Toryism, or puzzle an affluent suburban audience with an explanation of worker ownership of industry.”

“Rule #12: Successful revolutions from the right have always presented themselves as restoring older traditions. Therefore, we should couch our agenda in restorationist terms whenever possible. Ours is a populist traditionalism, not an elitist one.”

Anti-fascist activism as such and by itself cannot stop the BNP growing, and ‘get out the vote’ campaigns to stop them at this or that election-time could be an endless – by current evidence, fruitless – exercise. The BNP’s strength is in the populist appeal of its ideas and the fears it plays on, and the only way to respond to that is to build some better, political alternative. As well as general recomposition of the labour movement and giving people confidence that it is possible to organise to resist the recession, we also need a louder voice for communism. Not narrow electoralism and creating a Labour Party mark II – which in the European examples of Die Linke and Rifondazione Comunista ended up joining the ‘real’ social democrats in managing capitalism and making attacks on the working class – but arguing that turning back the clock is no answer to capitalism’s crisis, that our class need to organise for its interests in the here and now and that we also need to radically reorganise society. We should do that not only to “stop the BNP” but because we ought to challenge the ruling class as such and as a whole. We are starting from a very low base, both in terms of the left’s numbers and its political culture: but far better to do that gradual work than endlessly chase rainbows like UAF.

“Rule #10: A political party cannot succeed, or even attract new members, if it takes as its premise the hopelessness of its cause.”

esol teaching: in whose interests?

by Alice Robson

"many of them [Jewish migrants] do not speak English and they mix very little with Englishmen...they are a race apart." (article published as part of a collection *The Destitute Alien in Britain*, 1892)

"One staggering statistic exposes the astonishing speed at which Britain is ceasing to be recognisable as a nation. Figures released yesterday reveal that as many as 14 per cent of our primary school children... speak English only as a second language, if at all... there are schools in some areas with high immigrant populations where barely a handful of children speak English as their mother tongue." (*Daily Mail*, 18 May 2009)

From Jewish workers arriving in London's East End in the late nineteenth century to the diverse groups of people migrating to the UK today, the ability of migrants to speak English has long been a preoccupation of politicians and the right-wing press. This has, however, never been as significant as today, when as part of the UK's increasingly draconian system of immigration controls, the right of non-EU citizens to British citizenship, settle in the UK - and soon, even to enter the country - requires a certain level of attainment in English. Most affected are those migrants who have not had formal education in their country of origin due to factors including conflict, economic pressures and gender inequality, or who are unable to access provision in the UK.

In July last year, the government announced plans to introduce a pre-entry language requirement for new arrivals in the 'medium term', flagrantly disregarding the results of its consultation on the issue. In the meantime, it is levelling a £50 tax on new migrants to 'help ensure that those who arrive here learn to speak English'. One of the conditions laid out by the 'Strangers into Citizens' campaign for an earned amnesty for certain migrants is that they pass an English language test. These proposals fuel, and are fuelled by, right-wing press hysteria about migration, which focuses on language both as a marker of difference and as the cause of increased costs on public services.

Given this context, the learning and teaching of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is inherently political. More than any other area of education, it is closely affected by immigration policy and on views of migrants in society more generally. Learners bring to the classroom experiences of racism, experienced in their interactions with public services, through the pernicious effects of immigration controls - waiting for an appeal decision on an asylum case or visa decision, months spent in detention, the fear or actual threat of deportation, not knowing whether family will be able to join them in the UK - to that experienced on the streets through racist attacks and discriminatory policing.

For most of its long history, the teaching of ESOL in the UK has been largely ignored in policy circles. Whilst this allowed considerable scope for what could be taught - such as the examples of innovative radical anti-racist education in ESOL classes in the 1980s - it has been chronically under-funded, frequently poor quality and often taught by untrained and unpaid teachers. In more recent years, where the state has given attention to ESOL, there have been sustained at-



the media whips up hysteria about migrants unable to speak english

tempts to use it as a tool to promote both a certain view of migrants - as a placid and willing source of cheap labour - and of whatever version of 'Britishness' is currently dominant in official circles.

The government response to the 2001 Bradford riots had a significant impact on ESOL teaching and learning in the UK. The Cantle Report of December 2001, commissioned by the government to address the causes of the riots, painted a picture of migrant communities 'self-segregating'. The blame for a lack of 'community cohesion' was laid firmly upon them. One focus - foreshadowing politicians' responses to the July 7th bombings in 2007 - was on the English language skills of the *mothers* of those involved. The Asian young people involved were British born and fluent in English - but this didn't stop their mothers' lack of fluency and the fact that many spoke languages other than English in the home being seen as a cause of division in communities. From this it was a small step to seeing the women's lack of fluent English as a contributor to disaffection amongst the younger generation and therefore to the riots. This clearly reflects sexist assumptions of women as the upholders of family, community and culture, as well as revealing a more complex subtext of gender, ethnicity and class.

On one hand, the Cantle Report served to depoliticise and delegitimize the concerns of the Asian youth of Bradford - the background to the riots themselves attempts by the National Front to march through the city. It also began an obsession with the amorphous concept of 'community cohe-

sion', with a 'universal acceptance of the English language' at its centre.

Following Bradford, speaking (and reading and writing) English was increasingly spoken of as an obligation. New migrants would be forced to learn English as a condition of their settlement here. This coercive policy is highly discriminatory against groups who have not access to learning in the country they migrated from. It disregards the barriers to learning that exist in the UK: long working hours, family commitments and inaccessibility of provision. It ignores the shameful shortages of ESOL provision (there are waiting lists of hundreds if not thousands of learners at many colleges in the UK) and years of under funding. It also ignores the rule whereby newly-arrived spouses cannot access ESOL provision for one year after their arrival, those in other visa categories for three years (a policy which obliges staff in colleges and other centres providing ESOL to act as immigration officers, checking passports for eligibility). For asylum seekers forced to move from urban centres under the dispersal policy, there may not be provision at all where they live. In 2007, the problem was compounded when the right to free ESOL courses was withdrawn, making classes inaccessible to thousands of learners. The University and College Union led a campaign against this, but the strategy of lobbying and getting MPs to sign an Early Day Motion was, unsurprisingly, ineffectual.

For those who do access provision, what is taught? The ESOL materials produced by the then Department for Education and Skills in 2001 are a real insight into government views of what migrants should be, using example upon example of migrants as compliant 'model citizens'. The twin focuses are 'community cohesion' and 'employability'. Workers are taught through all the stages of getting a low-paid job (helpfully assisted in this by their local JobCentre), and how to communicate in deferential fashion when they get one (being shown politely asking for time off to go to an appointment). All interaction with service providers and those in positions of authority is problem-free, ignoring dynamics of class and race which so often structure these exchanges; the underlying message that if you don't get what you need it is your fault, not that of the authority figure. Many teachers reject this, do not use the materials (there is no requirement to do so as long as the curriculum is covered) and some ESOL classrooms are spaces where genuinely participatory, learner-centred, class-conscious education takes place.

However, with funding for courses increasingly tied to getting learners into work, teachers have to fight increasingly hard to sustain them. Much provision is now contracted out to private companies with little knowledge or experience of ESOL education. The UCU has been campaigning for the government to compel businesses to pay for ESOL classes. Whilst it is true that workers without English are paid less and more likely to be exploited than English-speaking workers, direct employer involvement in provision (itself a form of privatisation) would mean courses moulded to the needs of businesses, not the real needs of the learner. When language and literacy is described as 'functional', the question must be: functional for whom?

cleaner activist victimised

Many readers of *The Commune* will know of Alberto Einstein Durango, a Colombian activist who worked as a cleaner at Schrodgers in the City of London; has recently been involved in supporting the workers involved in the Mitie/Willis dispute (see box); and also spoke at a recent public meeting of ours in London on "what unions do we have, and what do we need?".

On the morning of May 6th, after attending a construction workers' demo at the Olympic stadium site he was called to a meeting at his employer, the cleaning contractor Lancaster, at 9.15am, under the pretense that he was due to be offered new work. Upon arrival he was met by four policemen, and arrested on suspicion of working under a false name (i.e. without appropriate papers).

The police took Alberto in handcuffs to his house, questioning him on why he had socialist papers in his bags (he had picked up several at the demo...). He also had a DVD concerning the Tamil struggle about his person (having been given a free copy at a meeting) and the police remarked

upon his possession of "terrorist" propaganda. All these materials were confiscated and his house searched before he was taken to Peckham police station.

In reality, Alberto had come to the UK ten years ago on a temporary student visa, and when it expired after four years his employer Lancaster told him to assume a false name so he could continue working. Alberto kept working under a false name after getting his indefinite leave to remain, and only now after he has become a leading labour activist has this same employer chosen to raise the issue of his immigration status, involving the police.

Fortunately Alberto escaped with a caution, and was released by 8pm. But this was a clear case of victimisation and as a result Alberto has now lost all the benefits accrued during 10 years' employment, such as the right to redundancy pay, as well as his job itself (he was until recently on suspension with pay).

For his part, Alberto is adamant that "the fight is only just beginning".

mitie/willis protests

There are weekly pickets of the Willis Group building in the City of London where cleaners were unfairly dismissed by contractor Mitie after complaining when they were forced to work full-time at night.

The demonstrations organised by these migrant workers take place each Friday 1pm at 51 Lime Street, near Bank tube station.

The cleaners have been fighting for more than three months, despite the failure of the Unite union and its 'Justice for Cleaners' campaign to support them. Come to the pickets and show your solidarity.

See Jake Lagnado's article in issue 4 of *The Commune* for a full account of the dispute, or visit <http://thecommuine.wordpress.com/?s=willis> for updates.

why pharma is sick

by Robert Kirby

The recent outbreak of “Swine Flu” in Mexico has focused the minds of governments worldwide on sourcing the drugs and vaccines that might be needed to combat a potential global pandemic. The UK government has already ordered nearly 15 million doses of antiviral drug Tamiflu from the pharmaceutical company Roche, and has touted diverting resources from the seasonal vaccines designed to protect the elderly from “ordinary” flu, to the search for a vaccine against the new strain. The question of who produces our drugs and how is once again climbing up the news agenda.

Some see the malignant hand of the “big pharma” lobby behind the panicky government and media responses to the epidemic; a perception which worries some of those involved in the industry. The belief that the pharmaceutical industry is uniquely powerful and evil is one that is widely shared amongst many radicals; their neglect of the third world comes under criticism from many NGOs and campaigners, their involvement in vaccine production scared many during the (entirely erroneous) MMR panic, and they and their scientists have come under political and sometimes physical attack from anti-vivisectionists.

But are these “unethical” activities really the problem? Many criticisms of the drug companies range from the wrong-headed (animal testing has saved many thousands of lives, and in a world that eats meat, it is frankly weird to fetishise medical research) to the simply paranoid (such as the generalised suspicion of modern science exemplified by the alternative medicine movement). It is the contention of this article that the real problem with the drug companies is not their machiavellian wickedness or their “scientific arrogance”, but that their need to make a profit is increasingly impeding their ability to continue to make the many advances in medical science that have characterised their history in the 20th century — the development of insulin, antibiotics and chemotherapies being just a few examples.

Superficially, the pharma industry seems one of the most dynamic at present; its heavy R&D spend accounts for nearly 30% of the UK total, and it remains one of the few sectors in which the moribund UK is a world beater, with British GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and AstraZeneca amongst the top 10 enterprises globally. But whilst the travails of the car industry and others have been making headlines, a quieter set of convulsions have been shaking the drug companies. A new round of mergers and acquisitions have been sweeping the pharmaceutical industry, with the world's largest drugs company, Pfizer, gobbling up its rival Wyeth for \$60 billion, Merck buying Schering Plough for \$41 billion, and Roche buying the large biotech company Genentech for \$47 billion. Like other employers, all the main players have been laying off staff, with Pfizer and AstraZeneca sacking 8000 apiece and GSK sacking 6000 globally in recent months, and with more than 10% of the UK pharma workforce having been laid off in the last 2 years.

But the problems facing “big pharma” aren't identical to those of all capitalists in the recession. In fact, as people get sick in all economic circumstances, and with a market largely guaranteed by government, they should be more insulated than most. But despite this seeming security, they have been facing a protracted slow motion crisis, since long before the credit crunch. The return on investment in the pharmaceutical industry has become catastrophically bad in recent years; a 2007 US government report documented how between 1993 and 2004, a 150% increase in R&D spending by the pharma industry managed only to produce a 38% increase in new drugs being approved for sale by regulators. More revealingly, the rate of completely new drugs, or “new molecular entities” (as opposed to so called “me-too” mimics of existing drugs that are just different enough to circumvent patents) fell by 40% between 1995 and 2004, making only 32% of drugs registered over that period. Added to this, the 20 year patents of many of the pharma companies most profitable “blockbuster” drugs will end in the next couple of years, opening them up to competition from “generic” manufacturers — without a broad portfolio of drugs to replace them.

So what is behind the lack of dynamism? Whilst risk averse regulators, overly expensive clinical trials, or the fact that the “low hanging fruit” of simple molecules have been picked are blamed by pharma executives, this industry wide systematic



anti-vivisection campaigners make use of anti-corporate rhetoric in their battle with the drugs industry: our objection to 'big pharma' is not 'unethical behaviour' or 'evil conspiracy', but rather capitalist control of medicine itself

malaise suggests that deeper issues may be responsible. Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy might give us some pointers to understanding their problems. Marx showed that as capital accumulates, and money is invested in new technology and plant, the ratio of constant capital (plant and machinery) relative to variable capital (workers employed) shifts in favour of the former. Whilst this increases productivity, it simultaneously dilutes the source of profits — the unpaid labour exploited from the workers. As capital moves from industry to industry, seeking more profitable outlets, the process is obscured, but the effect is the same — decades of investment in high throughput analysers, informatics systems as PCR machines has gradually squeezed the life out of the drug companies (1).

The decline in profitability means that these companies are forced to look for ways out of their fix — and as research becomes less attractive, scrapping over the spoils already to be had becomes a more central concern. Besides the “me-too” drugs mentioned above, which attempt to hive off part of an already established market for less risk than doing something innovative, there is a constant churn of rent-seeking squabbles in the courts over patents with generics companies.

"Most state healthcare systems essentially function as a permanent Keynesian “pump primer”, keeping the drug companies afloat."

Perhaps the strangest part of the worldwide drug industry is the pseudo-mercantilist “parallel traders”, who buy cheap in one country and sell dear in another, mainly within the EU. They repackage the drugs in line with local languages and regulations, and naturally enrage the drugs companies for appropriating part of their surplus value. Responding to pressure from the drugs companies, the European Commission is looking to ban drug repackaging, essentially outlawing parallel trade; capitalists 1 — free trade 0!

This increasing reliance on the state, which to hysterical observers looks like a corporate takeover (2), is in fact a symptom of weakness. Pharmaceuticals is possibly the most heavily regulated industry in the world, with complex systems and approvals needed for manufacturing, animal testing, clinical trials, transportation packaging and even advertising of drugs. This is partly a sensible precaution to take for potentially lethal products, but also functions as a barrier to entry for smaller competitors. Outside of the US, prices are

generally set by the state through regular haggling over “reimbursement”, through agencies like NICE; a far cry from the traditional Darwinism of the free market of old. Most state healthcare systems essentially function as a permanent Keynesian “pump primer”, keeping the drug companies afloat.

There is a marked tendency towards monopolism too; many drugs in the “pipelines” of the big players weren't researched by their own scientists, but were bought (often along with the entire company) from small biotechs and universities — Pfizer is a particular specialist in this tactic. Besides the mergers activity mentioned above, many collaboration deals divide up geographical areas between competitors. Additionally, the patent system, so central to the drug companies' business model, is a state enforced restriction on free competition. The perennial favourite of capitalists in trouble — the export of capital to less developed regions — is as strong in the drug companies as anywhere else.

So what does the future hold for the drugs companies? The restructuring options open to them are more limited than in many other industries. Unlike other manufacturers, there are limits on the extent to which they can pursue outsourcing to the third world; tight restrictions on manufacturing standards, and scares like the Chinese contaminated milk scandal mean that there are technical and political barriers to this strategy. Likewise, the higher level of training of their workers (many at PhD level) means that there are limits on the cuts they can impose, although the largely deunionised workforce is more vulnerable than some others.

But the question is still begged, is this the most rational way to do things? At a time when scientific advance is opening up great new possibilities — particularly developments in genomics and related areas — we are facing the biggest crisis in decades, limiting our potential to exploit them. More profoundly, the capitalist accumulation process itself limits its own development. What should be progressive — increased investment in new technology and labour saving machinery — becomes a limitation on development by the obstacles it places in the way of profit making. We need to strip away the capitalist structures of value relations and property ownership from the drugs industry — and the rest of the economy — and push forward its progressive potential for the good of humanity as a whole.

(1) see *The Law of Accumulation* by Henryk Grossmann, 1992, Pluto Press for a fuller exposition of the phenomenon

(2) see for instance George Monbiot's slightly paranoid turn in the middle of an unusually reasonable article <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/11/science-research-business>

thatcher's children

by an east London teacher

News of students occupying universities across the UK in protest at Israeli atrocities prompted some on the Left to proclaim young people as a new revolutionary force in Britain. This assessment is in part wishful thinking, since if it was accurate, the disproportionate amount of time the Left spends on recruiting and organising students would have some justification.

It is undoubtedly true that there has been an upsurge in student activism around international issues. Many of the school students who walked out of classes in opposition to the 2003 Iraq War are now at university, and their radicalism has not diminished. Any conclusions about a general leftwards shift on the part of the young should be resisted, however. There are no signs that the Gaza campaign will develop into a broader progressive movement. Indeed, research from 2008 shows that students are more likely to express support for the Conservatives than for Labour. Perhaps this isn't surprising, since due to Britain's inegalitarian education system, university students are disproportionately middle class.

Therein lies the rub. All the talk on the Left about the radicalism of the young is really about the limited radicalism of young, middle class students. What of the working class young people who do not end up going to university, or who are among the 22% of students who fail to complete their university courses? Almost all the articles on working class young people from the *Socialist Worker* newspaper focus on media demonisation of youth, and the failure of government to meet young people's needs on education and crime. The following passage, from an article about youth crime, is typical:

"Poor education, poverty, inequality, poor life prospects and decimation of local services — these are the conditions in which many of our young people are living and which create the conditions for some to turn to crime and violence."

Working class young people are cast as passive victims without agency. The political views of working class youth, and the way they see themselves and their society, are neglected. If the Left is to have any hope of building support for its politics in the future, it needs to get to grips with the worldview of young people growing up in communities devastated by Thatcherism.

The kids I work with are predominantly from working class backgrounds. Most have parents employed in routine clerical or manual occupations, though a substantial minority come from families where neither parent works. Some are the children of immigrants who, due to lack of job opportunities or their own refusal to accept poverty pay, have set themselves up as self-employed — often in the "black" economy. Over 90% are non-white: Bengalis, West Africans and Caribbeans are the largest ethnic groups. Nearly all are classified as from "socially deprived" backgrounds. They should be part of the target market for Left groups, but very few have any awareness of socialism or progressive politics. Last month, anti-capitalist demonstrators descended on the Excel Exhibition Centre, round the corner from the College where I work. The students viewed the protests with a mixture of curiosity, amusement and indifference, but seemed to feel no sense of identification with the protestors.

Many of my students are highly ambitious — often ludicrously so. Kids with four GCSEs who have trouble reading and writing announce their plans to become corporate lawyers, doctors and businesspeople. I'm often reminded of Delboy from *Only Fools and Horses* and his reassuring words to a sceptical younger brother: "this time next year, Rodney, we'll be millionaires!" As with Delboy, the bravado often masks deep insecurities. Through their time in education, a gap grows between their ambitions and their ability to achieve them. The more distant the prospect of educational success becomes, the more they cling to the fantasy of future wealth. Many give up on tasks after the tiniest set back, afraid to grapple with the problem in case the effort makes the anticipated failure more painful. It is common for kids to mock and take delight in the failure of others, as this provides a welcome distraction from their own inadequacies. Many of them refuse to take responsibility for their actions when they experience failure, since to do so would force them to address their weaknesses.

The kids I work with generally reject the idea that anyone could be motivated by altruism or any non-material concerns, and assume people are naturally selfish. They are keenly aware of their own "rights" but often dismissive of the



few young people identify with the likes of david cameron, but the last tory government did much to break the idea of collective political action

rights of others. The vast majority of students in every class I have taught favour much harsher restrictions on the rights of immigrants, despite the fact that they are generally the descendants of immigrants themselves. They generally accept the view of British society as meritocratic. While most acknowledge the existence of class as a social fact, they do not see it as a structural barrier to material success. Instead of structural explanations, there is widespread support for "conspiracy theory" views of the world, with the Jews or the Freemasons cast as evil masterminds controlling events.

It isn't hard to imagine the political views that flow from these assumptions about human nature and British society. My students tend to support the neoliberal model of "tolerance", insisting upon the right of others to pursue their own self interest. On economics, most are firmly opposed to progressive taxation and redistribution of wealth: Tory proposals to raise the inheritance tax threshold and reverse Labour's increase in the top rate of tax are popular. If I point out to my students that such taxes affect a tiny minority of the population, the response is that they might be in that tiny minority before too long. Most of my students support harsh, authoritarian policies on law and order, and blame crime on individual criminals rather than social factors.

In short, the majority of the working class young people I work with seem to have accepted Thatcherite principles and assumptions in full. There is no society; only competing and ruthless individuals. Collectivism is a doomed endeavour, since people are bound by nature to seek their own benefit at the expense of others. It is easy to move up through the class system, and anyone can "get to the top" with the requisite hard work. People are entitled to the fruits of their labour and have no obligation to give up any of their money in the form of redistributive taxes.

"The vast majority of students in every class I have taught favour much harsher restrictions on the rights of immigrants, despite the fact that they are generally the descendants of immigrants themselves"

Of course, the picture is far more complex and nuanced than the one I have sketched. In their personal dealings with others, for instance, most of my students amply demonstrate the altruism they deny exists. It is also true that my students do not constitute a representative cross section of British society. Since many are the children of recent immigrants, they do not have the ingrained awareness of class that indigenous British people often do. Those whose parents are self employed are perhaps less likely to be sensitive to class than those whose parents are workers.

Most importantly, they are just kids with no experience of the world of full time work. Once they leave college or university, they are bound to come up against the realities of a deeply unequal and unfair society and their views will surely

change. However, the direction of that change is by no means pre-ordained. Someone who has always believed that society is meritocratic will not necessarily abandon that belief once they find themselves unemployed or in a low paid, unsatisfying job. In the absence of a socialist political culture, they are as likely to blame their situation on Eastern European immigrants and cartels of Jewish bankers as they are to point the finger at an exploitative economic system. The evidence is that young people do have reactionary views on a number of issues. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2007 showed that young people were less concerned with economic inequalities and much less supportive of policies to redistribute wealth than older respondents. Indeed, it would be surprising if decades of neoliberal social policies, designed in part to weaken social solidarity and support for collectivism, were not successful in altering the views of those who have grown up under them.

A good way to begin to tackle some of these problems would be to set up community organisations to involve working class young people in activities that prove that altruism and collectivism are possible. The left-leaning Kurdish / Turkish youth organisation DayMer runs a number of such activities for kids in East London, including sports activities and trips away. This approach should not be confused with the left-liberal stance that working class young people are simply bored and do not have enough to do. Of course the dearth of youth and community facilities is something that should be addressed as a matter of urgency, but unless there are community organisations that facilitate activities that engage young people in self-sacrifice and teamwork, attitudes are unlikely to change.

The Left should also build on the elements of the views of working class young people that have progressive potential. Ideas about personal responsibility should be nurtured rather than dismissed as reactionary. For instance, any approach to crime that is seen to absolve criminals of responsibility for their actions is unlikely to gain many adherents among working class youth. Ideas about hard work can also be progressive, but the need to work hard for others as well as to fulfil personal potential should be stressed. Similarly, we should not argue against seeking "success", but should try to broaden the notion of success to include non-material and intrinsic goals.

Romantic notions of young people as a revolutionary force are wide of the mark at present. In fact, unless community and political organisations can successfully intervene, it seems likely that the Left will have an even harder job recruiting and organising in the working class communities of the future than they have today.

✉ This article was originally published at Left Luggage (www.theleftluggage.wordpress.com). Left Luggage has been formed by a small, independent group of community organisers and trade union shop-stewards in the UK. The blog is an attempt to initiate a discussion within the British Left around strategic issues, including questioning some of our most fundamental organising principles.

The site has already featured excellent articles highlighting and analysing the isolation of most of the left from the working class, and providing practical suggestions on how this isolation might be overcome.

the spectre of marx is back

by Clifford Biddulph

In January 2007, the *Financial Times* declared that emerging market economies would continue to power ahead. Capitalism was triumphant. The ghost of Karl Marx had been laid to rest. But then just when the progress of the unfettered market appeared unstoppable it spectacularly crashed. Some of the world's biggest banks collapsed. The housing and credit bubble burst. Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the federal bank, in the USA, confessed that his free market confidence in the self interest of bankers had been wrong. (Andrew Clark in *The Guardian*, October 24th 2008).

Bourgeois politicians were forced to eat their words and stand on their heads. The mantra of government economic intervention bad, free markets good, heard for over two decades was replaced by nationalisation of banks and government bailouts for failing capitalists and capitalism. In October 2008 the New Labour government, a champion of the free market for a decade, bailed out leading banks with £50 billion. This was only the first bailout. Another bailout followed only months later. The neo-liberal free market melt down was so shocking that *The Times* carried a portrait of Karl Marx with the words: 'he is back'. (October 21st 2008).

The spectre of Marx brought the fear that the neo-liberal theory of the end of history or the prediction that there was no alternative was just a class bound set of ideas which mystified or distorted history and social relations. Neo-liberalism is an ideological god that has failed. This is a judgment not from a Marxist revolutionary, but an assessment from the *Financial Times* economics editor, Martin Wolf. (*Financial Times*, March 9th 2009) In the conservative view of Martin Wolf, "we are facing the deepest, broadest and most dangerous financial crisis since the 1930s". The IMF is predicting a downturn of 3% to 3.5% in economic growth, in 2009, in the advanced economies.

Martin Wolf is not optimistic. But what is truly frightening for Martin Wolf is the ideological vacuum. Failure has been rewarded with huge sums of money in tax funded bonuses to bankers. This has undermined capitalist legitimacy. There is a lot of public anger which could become dangerous.

There is serious uncertainty in governments world wide, particularly in Europe and the USA about what can be put in the place of free market economics. Political commentators such as Seumas Milne (*The Guardian*, October 23rd 2008) believe it is free market capitalism that is bankrupt not capitalism. Keynes is back, not Marx. A new regulated capitalism is required. It is 35 years since Jim Callaghan, the Old Labour prime minister, bowed to neo liberalism and declared that the Labour Party could not spend its way out of a crisis. But at the G20 summit, summoned at the end of 2008 after the economic tsunami had struck, New Labour leader Gordon Brown, an ideological son of Thatcher, turned his ideology upside down, advocating that internationally governments should spend their way out of recession. Only in that way could the globalised economy survive.

Many commentators were hoping a new Bretton Woods agreement would emerge from this gathering of the world's leading bourgeois politicians. But there was no agreement on a global fiscal rescue package. There were also protectionist undercurrents. Shortly before the G20 summit was reconvened in April 2009 — where Gordon Brown intended to save the financial world with state subsidies — there was, in the words of Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrats' Treasury spokesperson, 'a very British coup', in which Mervyn King, the governor of the Bank of England, sent his tanks down the Mall, stating that Britain could not afford another state financial stimulus.

What we are faced with is a structural crisis of capital accumulation: an historical turning point. The rise to power of neo-liberalism began with a similar if less profound crisis in the mid 1970s. The capitalist system did not crash, but sunk into a malaise of inflation and stagnation. Keynesian-influenced economic intervention in capitalist markets was perceived to have failed. Britain was economically bankrupt and bailed out by the IMF in 1976. Dennis Healy, the Old Labour leader, stated that the Keynesian spending party was over. Earlier in 1973, in Chile, there had been the pioneering experiment in neo-liberal state building and economic deregulation with privatisation of state assets. This was on the back of a US and CIA inspired military coup led by General Pinochet, Thatcher's friend. The Chicago boys or economists trained in the neo-liberal economics of Milton Friedman reconstructed the Chilean economy along monetarist lines following the bloody suppression of the 'enemy within', or the organised workers' movement.



no-one on wall street can ignore karl marx...

Friedman had been a liberal voice in the wilderness in the 1950s and 60s during the decades of the "post war settlement", or the high point of Keynesian welfare capitalism, along with the other guru of the neo-liberals, Friedrich Hayek, who had erroneously predicted that the extension of collectivism and state intervention in the west would lead to totalitarianism. Although Hayek and Friedman presented their neo-liberal views as fundamentally different from the politics and economics of the mixed economy, in fact, they are a variations on a capitalist theme. Keynes and Beveridge, the architects of welfare capitalism, were intellectual liberals. They wanted to save capitalism, not replace it with state socialism.

In the view of Keynes, left to it self, the capitalist market would implode. Unregulated capitalism had slumped in the 1930s with mass unemployment and the failure to reform orthodox economics and the state was a factor leading to the barbarism of the Second World War. The compromise between the forces of labour and capital following the war was based on the popular front against fascism — which was itself an irrational response to the inter war capitalist crisis — and the politics of full employment and state intervention to modernise the capitalist state and society. This was embedded liberalism.

The capitalist golden age of the post war settlement was built on the financial agreements made by the world's foremost capitalist states at Bretton Woods where the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were established. The financial strength of the American dollar propped up other currencies. And the entire structure depended on the support of the military power of American imperialism which enabled, amongst other things, the cheap and abundant supply of oil

The long boom was over. Keynesianism was stuck in orthodoxy and was unable to renew itself to creatively deal with new problems. There was a return to pre-Keynes Liberalism. The most influential neo-liberals were Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman. Hayek and Friedman were passionately anti-communist and hostile to socialism and most forms of collectivism.

They asserted that markets were superior to the economic activity of the state. The state and collectivism was to be rolled back. Industrial militancy and the enemy within — socialism — had to be faced down. Privatisation and deregulation to free up markets were to be brought in. Stock values and finance were emphasised. Public expenditure was to be cut back to halt inflation. Taxes were to be cut. It has been calculated that between 1979 and 1986 in the UK "out of the £8.1 billion in tax cuts nearly half went to the richest ten percent and almost two thirds to the richest 20%" (Crompton, 2008, *Class and Stratification*, Cambridge, Polity). To control inflation, sound money was to be established and full employment to be abandoned as an aim. Unemployment and wages would find their "natural level". Respect for profits and profitability were to be restored.

In Marxist terms, the reserve army of labour was to be re-established and the conditions to facilitate exploitation improved. The success of the capitalist offensive in rolling back the post war gains of the working class can be seen in Rosemary Crompton's estimate that between 1979 and 1994, after housing costs the incomes of the richest 10% in the UK grew by over 60% while the poorest 10% fell by nearly 10% (p. 144). But in free market ideology, inequality generates general prosperity or the trickle down effect, and poverty is an individual failing, not a structural issue.

The spontaneous market leads to unintended outcomes so there is no intention to create inequality. So there cannot be injustice. Despite this ideological gloss, David Harvey (2007) provides the statistics that expose the international reality underneath the neo-liberal apologetics for capitalism. "The net worth of the 358 richest people in 1996 was equal to the combined income of the poorest 43% of the worlds population a total of 2.3 billion people" (*Neo-liberalism*, p. 34). Some billionaires have a greater income than some countries' GNP.

The ideology of neo-liberalism has debased the meaning of freedom to the advocacy of free enterprise and the market mechanism. Thatcher famously declared that for her society did not exist. When she became prime minister in 1979 Thatcher boasted that she would significantly cut public expenditure and reduce the state sector. But after a decade of neo-liberal government the overall size of the public sector was not reduced and state spending as a percentage of GDP remained at the same levels of expenditure as the first days of her conservative government. A case of the state expanding and rolling rightwards. The agricultural sector or rich landowners were protected by the state from the full rigours of the market and vast amounts of public money was spent on the military and the Falklands War. And the full power of the state was mobilised to defeat the miners' union and destroy mining communities.

Hayek's capital apologetics are circular definitions based on the assumption that the only rationality is free market anarchy. For Hayek "as long as it remains a spontaneous order, the particular results of the social process cannot be just or unjust". But the market is not free standing, free of politics, a natural order or an ideologically neutral economic machine. If there are less job vacancies than job seekers, then there is collective unfreedom. The current crisis structured unemployment level is 2 million with a prediction of 3 million by the end of the year.

While in Hayek's theory, capital is free to organise internationally, workers are not free in Hayek's theory to organise solidarity action. Even peaceful picketing is coercive and wage militancy is dangerous and makes the market ineffective. Indeed, Hayek has no room for trade unions in his idealised free market or as he states "it would indeed be a highly desirable state of affairs if the workers should not feel the necessity to form unions" (Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 1990, p. 274). Desirable for the bosses, but the workers did and do feel the necessity to join unions.

The current structural crisis of capitalism has shown the hollowness of free market apologetics. April's G20 summit of the world's leading states has still not been able to find a new deal to rescue capitalism. As Chris Giles of the *Financial Times* noted, despite the huge amount of money earmarked to the IMF for crisis intervention, there has been no international agreement on specific measures to clear up international toxic debt. (*Financial Times*, April 3rd 2009) There is the spectre of the Great Depression with a growing protectionist mood. The World Bank has 73 examples of protectionism, including president Barack Obama signing into law 'American clauses' which discriminate against foreign suppliers. (*Financial Times*, March 30th 2009)

There is a growing perception that the economic collapse is not just part of a cycle of boom and bust, but a system failure. Over two million homes have been repossessed in the USA. A sober *Financial Times* journalist Dominique Moisi compared the mass anger against bankers in the USA to the mood during the French revolution (*Financial Times*, April 3rd 2009). This might be an historical exaggeration, but it does indicate the transformation of public consciousness and the political radicalisation taking place. Factory occupations have returned to the Britain. In France general strikes have taken place and more are planned. In Greece there have been riots. Capitalism has been seen to be inherently unstable, riddled with fraud, greed, and inequality. On a world scale capital has failed to satisfy the elementary requirements of humanity despite utilitarian talk of the happiness of the greatest number.

What has been visible recently is the fragility of capitalism and the open ended nature of history. There has been talk of green shoots of economic recovery but this is superficial speculation which reflects the effects of recent measures such as printing money. But as Martin Weale, the director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research explains, there are still headwinds ahead: a pause in the economy before resuming its decline. (Daniel Pimlott, *Financial Times* p. 4, May 13th 2009). The spectre of Karl Marx is back.

capitalism, keynes, socialism

by Nathan Coombs

In reaction to the global economic crisis, in his cover story for the current issue of *Prospect* magazine Geoff Mulgan tantalisingly holds out the promise of what life would look like 'After Capitalism'. The only problem is that his hodgepodge of possible routes beyond capitalism — foremost the vague vision of "servant capitalism" — not only do not transcend capitalism, are not only being articulated by those with the greatest stake in promulgating capitalism (he even cites David Cameron as playing a part), but are even aspects of capitalism with us today: the same aspects to have played their part in inducing the global crisis that supposedly marks the beginning of a new epoch.

Amongst his suggestions of routes beyond capitalism he includes Keynesian investment in green industries, the pluralisation of company governance and the introduction of "personal welfare counts" (previously called the welfare state?) It does not take a whole lot of nous to work out that this is hardly a portrait of a world 'after capitalism,' but simply an extrapolation of contemporary trends within capitalism: precisely those trends that have historically prevented the possibility of any 'after'.

In other words, is it really so difficult to imagine that green entrepreneurs will become the new tycoons of the 21st century; backed by government decrees enforcing the adoption of their technologies and authorisation of their patents? Has the welfare state historically achieved more than rounding off the sharp edges of capitalism and exculpating the middle class's guilt about the presence of massive underclasses in phenomenally wealthy countries? Will these purported servile tendencies do anything to end the unstoppable global progression towards soaring inequalities and the collapse of social mobility?

Mulgan is not the only one, however, to see in a revived Keynesian spirit a route beyond capitalism; that despite the fact Keynes' theory from the start was intended to halt the spread of communism throughout Europe. Darling of the liberal-left, Joseph Stiglitz, has called for "a new kind of public-private partnership" and "a new balance between market and government." Those on the left of the Labour party have also apparently been pressing for a Keynesian fiscal stimulus package; and we are told that finally we now have a clear demarcation between the Conservatives and Labour over the issue of national debt and counter-cyclical spending.

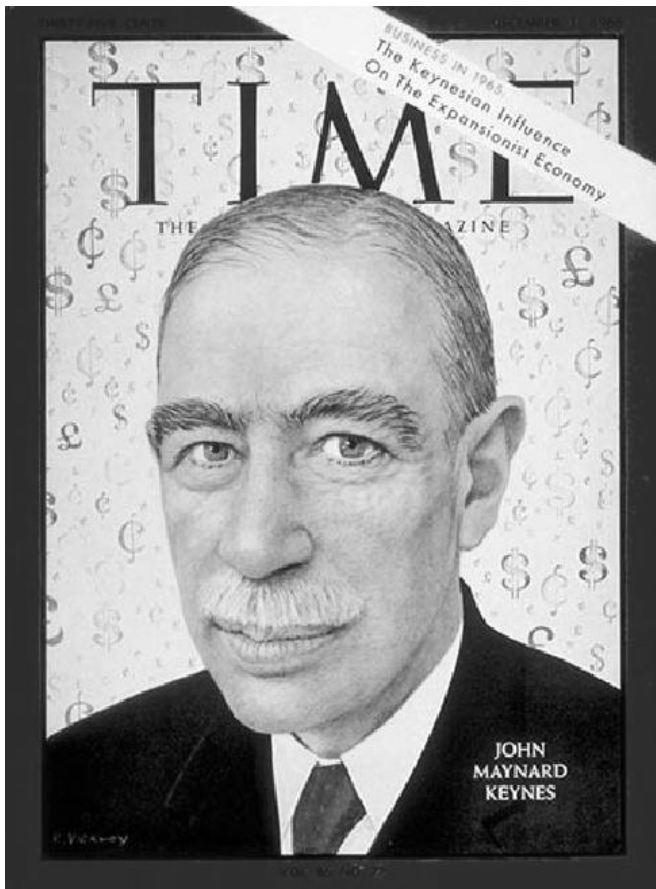
Yet if this is Keynesianism, it is an odd one. With U.K. national debt reaching unprecedented levels and most of that having been squandered on propping up the crumbling edifice of the banking system and tax cuts to boost consumption, there is little left to adopt even minimal investment programs. Rumour has it that the international bond markets are likewise getting uneasy with the UK and United States' prolificacy with their national debts and might, at some point, no longer wish to keep buying.

It is thus a bizarre spectacle to see the liberal-left flock to resuscitate Keynes at this particular global political-economic conjuncture. The lack of objective analysis of whether Keynesian economics has any relevance to the current situation — nevermind its desirability or not — signals a true lack of ideas and head in the sand mentality. That the ultimate source of credit and the sustainment of artificially high standards of living vis-à-vis value creation in the West, comes from high savings in the East; on this point no debate within the realm of mainstream politics or economics has anything to say. It is, quite simply, political economy; and politicians don't do political economy nowadays.

That is also not to say though that the Left is doing much better in the ideas department. At the start of his article Mulgan cites Marx and quite correctly observes: "much contemporary anti-capitalist literature (from David Korten, Wendell Berry, Alain Lipietz or Michael Albert) is that they offer little account of how their visions might be realised and how powerfully entrenched interests would be overcome." At the same time, however, he ignores the key lesson of Marx; the

source of problems within capitalism does not come from its form (polluting vs. non-polluting, regulated vs. unregulated etc.) but from the logic of capital itself. Where the mechanisms of capital are at work, it can never be the 'servant' of any, except for those who stand to benefit and profit from its workings. Keynesian economics was supposed to take the edge off the hardship of workers, but only so that they would not rise up and topple the system itself.

Still, let us leave aside the poignant subject of agency Mulgan raises, because it is undoubtedly true that all mooted anti-capitalist cries of 'there is an alternative' do not contain with them the necessary forces to achieve their, albeit limited, goals. No — the question is rather whether in fact the opposite of Mulgan's supposed plethora of alternatives to capitalism currently defines our contemporary predicament?



keynesian economics — the answer to the global economic crisis?

Recently in *Comment is Free* Eric Hobsbawm argued "socialism has failed" — cue the cries of those who believe that 20th century socialism was never really tested, that communism wasn't given a chance once it was driven off the rails by Stalin. The Trotskyite thesis that true workers power was suppressed by bureaucracy falls a little flat though when we consider that across the world all socialist and communist states ended by falling into the same pattern: centralised state-run economies that ultimately lagged behind their capitalist rivals. The answer by some, reiterated again in Mulgan's piece, is the only answer lies in reducing consumption and the pace of modern life within capitalism. This all seems a bit rich when we still are afflicted with a housing crisis, inadequate medical science and the shackles of wage labour; all set within a global context in which the impoverished of the world are crying out for development and their slice of an enlarged pie.

For many on the Left, developments in Latin America have signaled a source of inspiration and hope: foremost the governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. The problem is that even in these supposedly 'radical' regimes, thumbing their nose to global capitalism and U.S. imperialism, there are persistent doubts as to the novelty and efficacy of the new socialism. As Jon Beasley-Murray surmises the findings of a new book on the Latin American Leftist governments:

"It turns out that the two most salient characteristics of the 'new Latin American left' are that it is neither new, nor particularly left, and that we are a long way from seeing 'utopia reborn'. Hence in Venezuela, it is not until 2007 that chavismo defines its goal as 'twenty-first century socialism,' and even 'Chavez did not explain ... in what respect [it] should differ from the Soviet experience of the twentieth century.'"

The same sentiments are expressed in a pamphlet by The Commune on 'the revolution delayed' in Venezuela, which for all the rhetoric of a new form of socialism being pioneered, the reality on the ground is state corporatism and the co-option and stagnation of all autonomous political activity outside the Party-state.

The problem then to any conception of moving beyond capitalism, or moving beyond Keynes, must lie in the lack of ideas of what and how such a society should work. Marx

himself was almost certainly deserves his fair share of guilt for this; manoeuvring the 19th century communist movement away from one of considering actual alternative social organisations to warning against writing the 'cookbooks of the future'. There is a certain logic to his argument; in that societies are organic creations that arise from the forces within them, not utopias to just be decided upon and grafted onto reality. Nevertheless, the deliberate shying away from such issues are no longer tenable in the context of the risk aversion with which people now look upon any attempts at radical change.

This means that we have to fundamentally revisit the question of how else society could be run that would not suffer the irrational developments within capitalism? Although it is tempting at this point to start invoking all sort of management speak, like the need 'to think outside the box,' we have to face a number of stark facts. First, any alternative to capitalism must, as a matter of course, be based on economics and power relations. Second, there are only really two historical models that present themselves as alternatives to capitalism: anarcho-syndicalism and the state-run economy.

Is it therefore the case that at present the only viable route is the theoretical renovation of the anarcho-syndicalist route? I think both historically and theoretically the answer has to be no. Despite communism's failures, it did at least have a model that was historically tested and could count some achievements, whereas anarchism has never succeeded in become a reality at all. In Hegel's words "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" — unless the Left is to slip into impotent utopianism, it would do well to keep these words in mind. It has never been clear how anarcho-syndicalism would remove capitalism or deal with the state and international state power. Unlike communism — 'nice idea, but doesn't work in practice' — anarchism must count as not a great idea and one that has never worked in practice.

Does all this take us back to the state-run economy as the only viable alternative? Depressingly, maybe it does. But perhaps a new route of thought beyond capitalism should not involve a simple resuscitation of discredited Stalinist models, but the re-questioning of the state in the state-run economy. Or, to put it another way, as the state plays an ever-increasing role in the economies of all major countries, perhaps moving beyond capitalism lies in challenging the particular state form we have at present. Perhaps it means pushing for widespread nationalisation, but only on the terms of a massive rethink of how state power operates and governs. As the gathering movement for civil liberties shows us, more are now willing to question the state than ever. What if that questioning could be made truly radical?

In any case, these are the sorts of economic and political questions which need to be addressed. The Left has so far failed to raise any substantial challenge in response to the economic crisis. Unless we do so, we will not be entering the new epoch Mulgan forebodes, nor basking in the warm glow of a Keynesian economic politics, but welcoming more of the same, or worse.

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the capitalist crisis: an interview with andrew kliman

In November the Marxist economist Andrew Kliman—author of *Reclaiming Marx's Capital*—spoke to us about the causes of the economic crisis, the structural crisis of capital and the alternative we should pose.

Printed alongside 'Nationalisation is no answer for our class' and 'The dual crisis of labour and capital', editorial sections of *The Commune* issue 1.

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revive flying pickets and spread the actions

by Chris Kane

For many union bureaucrats, hardened cynics on the traditional left and post-modern professors who believe the working class has disappeared, the events of the last five months must be very frustrating. We have seen the revival of unofficial strikes during the Lindsey oil refinery dispute, with the complete and open defiance of the anti-trade union laws. We have also seen a string of workplace occupations, the most recent being at the Visteon plants in Belfast and London.

These past months of revived activity and assertiveness by workers have been remarkable: it is clear evidence that there is an alternative to simply accepting the recession. It offers the possibility of gathering together the forces of the labour movement to challenge the employers' offensive now underway. The choice facing the working class could not have been posed more starkly than when, at the same as Wales TUC general secretary Martin Mansfield called on the congress to "drive forward partnership working" with employers, a new wave of unofficial strikes were breaking out down the road at Milford Haven in South Wales, spreading to Vale of Glamorgan and a string of other sites.

This new phase has not however been without its contradictions; this is understandable in light of the legacy of two decades of anti-union laws and neo-liberalism. Whilst we have seen the anti-union laws defied and revival of wild-cats and occupations, the bureaucracy of the existing labour movement has still in some cases been able to assert its authority, often in a negative manner, imposing settlements short of what was in fact achievable. This was also noticeable in the first phase of the current London Underground dispute, where despite an overwhelming vote for strike action the union leadership refused to defy the anti-union laws, despite a clear desire by numerous workers, such as in former Metronet branch, to take action. 'Radical' RMT leaders have found themselves out of step, and to the right of the desires



the visteon occupations showed signs of revival for our movement

of the rank and file members who they educated in the principles of militant industrial unionism! In this regard communists need to be unhesitatingly with the rank and file in this strategically important dispute. We also saw this problem on the political front in the PCS deputy general secretary elections, where Independent Left candidate John Moloney came a close second to the right wing bureaucrat Hugh Lanning: the careerist Lanning was, disgracefully, backed by the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party!

Two issues have come to the fore in the recent revival: one is rank and file democracy, the other is the question of how to spread the disputes.

There have been whole new steps forward in workers' self-organisation, yet in some disputes this has been sorely lacking. The traditional principle of communists is exemplified by the old Glasgow Clyde Workers' Committee which declared, "We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but will act independently immediately they misrepresent them." In some unions such as RMT where there is a Regional Council open to all members the

need for an independent strike committee may well be unnecessary.

Such committees can only arise from the activity of the workers themselves who see them as necessary to take forward *their* dispute. However whilst communists are not about patronising and forcing the revolution down our fellow workers' throats, we do have a duty of purpose to share our own knowledge and experience to assist strikes and occupations. We should pose clearly the need to organise regular meetings of strikers to run occupations and disputes, with or if necessary without the official leadership of the union.

A clear sign of the weakness of the traditional left in the movement is its inability to deliver actual solidarity: by that we do not mean meetings, leaflets etc., but strike action. If we are to resist the recession, then all the various struggles springing up cannot realise their full potential power if they remain sectional, fragmented and limited in their character. We need to start finding a way to spread the spontaneous actions which are arising. For example, if at the start of the Visteon occupation pickets had been sent to Dagenham there is every possibility it could have generated a whole new force behind the action; if the RMT had similarly defied the law at this time and struck, we would have witnessed a wave in the capital city which could have put workers' resistance on a new scale. This is not a fit of fantasy; it is precisely the type of action common only twenty years ago.

There currently exist around 160,000 workplace union rep', which is broadly similar to the number of shop stewards in the mid-1960s, before the great upsurge of workers' struggle in the UK. We have a bitter legacy to overcome: many workers are naturally fearful of unemployment, but we are not in a situation that cannot be changed. We need to re-build and re-organise our existing union organisations. Part of that is the regeneration of the confidence to act independently of the law and the bureaucrats, so that when we see the next outbreak of action such as Lindsey or Visteon we can point to the common root cause and spread the action.

political platform of the commune

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

We are internationalists: we seek the greatest possible collaboration with communists in other countries; we build solidarity with workers' movements around the world; we are opposed to all borders and immigration controls; and we 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.

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