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a class war in westminster?

by Adam Ford

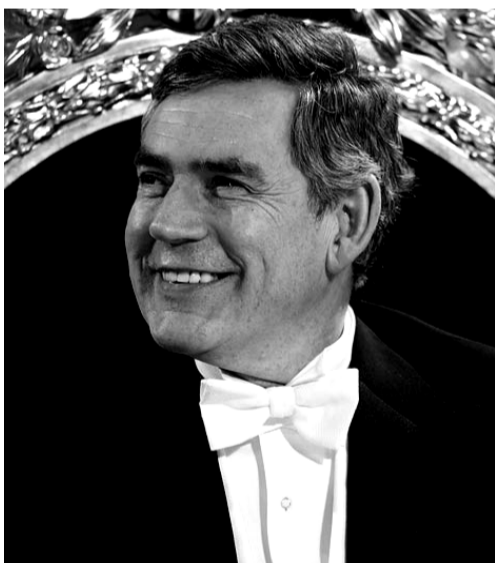
When Gordon Brown claimed the Conservative Party's inheritance tax policy was "dreamed up on the playing fields of Eton", he must have thought he was scoring an easy political point. However, he had touched off a storm which would fascinate politicians and commentators for days, by alluding to the great unmentionable: social class.

"They know a powder keg situation when they see one"

David Cameron responded by complaining that the "petty, spiteful, stupid" line marked the start of a Labour Party-led "class war" against the wealthiest in society, and pundits speculated that Chancellor Alistair Darling would use his pre-budget report to launch swingeing attacks on those at the top of the tree. In the event, he merely proposed a one-off tax on banker bonuses over £25,000. Considering the government has already spent £850 billion bailing out the banks, the £550 million he forecast this would bring in amounts to just a drop in the bucket. Even so, he provided sufficient loopholes to protect bankers from even this puny infringement on their enormous wealth, and increased VAT, which disproportionately hits the poorest. Normal service had resumed.

The media still fretted though. As could be expected, the Tory-supporting papers made a furious defence of Cameron and his shadow cabinet, of which seventeen members were privately educated. Harry Phibbs of the *Daily Mail* attacked Brown for his "desperate, divisive tactic" of drawing attention to the truth. But even more interesting was 'civil liberties defender' Henry Porter, in the supposedly 'progressive' *Guardian*. "As a nation we've always been more interested in character", he announced, so "...the better part of each one of us knows that class is an obstacle to understanding someone's character, and is certainly no way of assessing a potential leader."

It is at best naive - or in Porter's case it is deliberately deceitful - to suggest that an individual's socio-economic background has no impact on their personal politics. On the contrary, getting to grips with someone's apparent material interests is the only way of getting to grips with them as a 'character', or public figure.



cameron has warned against a 'class war': but this lot all know whose side they're on

Cameron is a distant relative of Queen Elizabeth, and a direct descendent of King William IV and his mistress Dorothea Jordan. His family made their money in finance and grain. He attended Heatherdown Preparatory School, Eton and Brasenose College, Oxford. His wife Samantha is the daughter of a baronet and a viscountess, and the *Mail* has estimated the Camerons' combined wealth at more than £30 million. After graduating, he joined the Conservative Research Department, at the height of Thatcherism and the uproar over the Poll Tax. Throughout his life, Cameron has known both that he is extremely wealthy, and that this wealth must be extended and defended from those who create it. In this context, his policies of class war against the poor make a lot of sense.

Unlike some within his cabinet, Gordon Brown was not born into such great extravagance. The son of a Church of Scotland minister, he was accepted into the University of Edinburgh aged just sixteen, due to his exceptional academic ability. He wrote his PhD thesis on James Maxton, a fiery Scottish parliamentary socialist, who once called a Tory MP a "murderer" when the government withdrew school milk. However, Brown needed to pragmatically sell out his youthful idealism in order to climb the greasy pole of 1980s and 90s Westminster politics. He did so, becoming - alongside Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson - a key architect of the anti-worker New Labour project. Attacking the working class of the UK and other nations has apparently become a kind of second nature to him, even though he rose from its ranks. No less than Cameron, he now understands that his advancement must come at the expense of those Maxton sought to represent.

In 1999, then Prime Minister Blair used his party conference speech to declare that the class war was over. So far as official circles were concerned, that was supposed to be that, at least so far as people fighting back was concerned. A decade later, with the chasm between the elite and the rest of us still widening by the day, we are beginning to see the first signs of resistance. In the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, and with a massive post-election offensive planned by the ruling class, it is considered extremely dangerous for a politician even to vaguely hint at class divisions. The people who own the economy - or at least some of their paid scribes - know a powder keg situation when they see one.

theocrats in iran strike out against activists

by Anahita Hosseini

Independent Leftist Students, Tehran

After the mass protests of Sunday December 27th the Iranian regime is showing its fear of the people's uprising by going to well known activists' homes one by one and arresting them.

The regime has created a new scenario on all of their TV channels: they are talking about what happened in the 80s. They are talking about the leftist opposition of Iran in those days and how the regime killed them because of their activities: they are frankly threatening people that they are not afraid of repeating history.

After the uprising it became more obvious that no one is of the illusion of re-running the elections. The slogans are aimed at the regime and Khamenei himself. Radicalization of the movement has made the regime fearful of the effect of leftist and other radical activists on the current uprising. They are threatening to bring back the bloody decade of the 80s in which they mass murdered thousands of the bravest, purest and truest believers in freedom and equality, especially in 1988 when they executed as many as thirty thousand leftists and Mujahideen and buried them in the mass graves.

Now they are threatening their children and all the other activists and people who are yelling their anger against them. In their official news they said that the rebels had crossed a red line by having slogans against Khamenei, and they will all pay for it. What is obvious is that they will not be able to repeat the bloody years of the 80s because they can't mass murder a nation.

But we should take the threat seriously on the level that we know this regime has nothing to lose and before its final collapse they may do anything for revenge. They may try to limit the number of activists against them. The threats they have started making against people are important on this levels, and it is our responsibility to fight until the release of each and every political prisoner in Iran, alongside supporting the peoples uprising. Underestimating the threats of the dictatorial regime in taking revenge on the protesters could end in catastrophe.

We will fight until all of our classmates, comrades and friends are released. We won't let the Islamic Republic take revenge on them for its inevitable collapse.

★See www.hopoi.org for info on solidarity with social movements in Iran

burn the borders

by the Collective for Solidarity with the accused of Vincennes

On 25th-27th January the Paris High Court will try ten people for the fire at the Vincennes immigrant detention centre.

Our solidarity must look at the full measure of the situation: demanding freedom for those on trial, yes, but also freedom of movement and residency.

The largest detention centre in France burnt on June 22nd 2008. From June 2008 to June 2009, some ten former detainees have been arrested and imprisoned – most of them for nearly one year – in preventive jail. They are charged with “damage”, “voluntary destruction of the buildings of the Vincennes administrative detention centre”, and/or “aggression in band against a police officer, without causing an incapacity of work for more than eight days”.

Movements of protest of the locked up sans-papiers have taken place ceaselessly during the six months before the fire. Hunger strikes, beginnings of fires, refusing to be counted, and individual or collective oppositions followed each other during this period. Outside, demonstrations and actions exposed the very existence of these centres and support the revolts.

On June 21st 2008, Salem Souli died in his room after he had asked in vain for medical care. The next day the detainees organized a march in his memory, which was violently repressed. A collective revolt followed and the detention centre was reduced to ashes.



the fire was the climax of a series of protests

To prevent this type of revolt from spreading, the State must strike hard, it has to find culprits. Ten persons were arrested to serve as examples. We do not care whether they are “guilty” or “innocent”. By punishing them, the State wishes to make disappear revolts, refusal of submission, and acts of resistance on the part of those who are - or will be in the future - between the walls of these centres. The Vincennes revolt is not isolated. Wherever there are detention centres, revolts will spring up, fires will start, flights, hunger strikes, mutinies, and destructions will take place.

The fire at the Vincennes detention centre is not only a symbol: as an immediate consequence of the disappearance of its capacity for 280 people, round-ups and deportations greatly decreased in the Paris region during the following period. Arrests were avoided by the thousands. This act by the detainees has put the deportation machine out of order for a while.

Detention centres are places where one waits, locked up, sometimes without end and without trial, where one dies for lack of care, where one kills oneself rather than be deported. Borders must be abolished!

For all these reasons, and because there is no “good” management of migration, because everybody must be able to decide where he wants to live, we are in solidarity with the accused of the revolt and the arson of the Vincennes detention centre!

★Week of action 16th-24th January: email liberte-sans-retenue@riseup.net

★Activists from No-one is Illegal, No Borders and the Campaign Against Immigration Controls are meeting in London to discuss how to work more closely together and find a path to uniting.

The meeting is being held from 1pm on Saturday 30th January at SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, near Russell Square and Euston stations.

north devon hospital strike

by a UNISON branch official
(personal capacity)

On 5th-6th January over 200 UNISON low paid porters, domestics and catering staff working for Sodexo took strike action. This dispute arose after Sodexo and the North Devon Healthcare NHS Trust, which contracts Sodexo to provide hotel services, refused to honour a government agreement aimed at achieving NHS terms and conditions for these staff. In 2005 the Labour government had signed this agreement with NHS employers, private contractors and trade unions with the intention of bringing the two tier workforce within the NHS to an end by October 2006. NHS trusts were given a total of £75 million to pass on to private contractor “soft facility” staff working in hospitals.

The ideology behind the private contractor agreement was clearly New Labour. Despite giving money for implementation it was never made enforceable. As fits their ideology, the leaders of New Labour didn't want to be seen as interfering with the internal workings of individual NHS trusts. Bringing private contractor staff back in house was not even mentioned. The net result was that many Trusts took the money but then refused to implement the agreement which has meant that ordinary union members have had to fight like hell for it.

It became clear from the start that it wasn't going to be easy to get Sodexo and the North Devon Healthcare Trust to adhere to the agreement. Our campaign began three and a half years ago. We began writing letters to the Trust and Sodexo and their response was a point blank refusal to sit down jointly and talk to us. However we did manage to get the two pre-phases of the agreement implemented which resulted in a pay increase for our members. The employers delayed us but we thought we were making progress. However, by early 2009 we were told that the agreement would not be implemented despite implementation occurring in the vast majority of hospitals across the country by this time. With a disillusioned membership growing increasingly angry with the union for failing to take things a step further, we felt close to defeat. The branch officials had felt disappointed that UNISON had failed to deliver the coordinated national fight we all had hoped for in 2007. We needed more help from UNISON to breathe new life into the campaign.

In summer 2009 we were allocated a new full time officer. At our first meeting with her we explained that the Sodexo dispute was the burning issue of the branch and that many of our members were on poverty pay and had no sick pay at all. Branch officials said that the members just needed to hear that the Regional office would take the dispute all the way if necessary. Branch officials insisted that this would be all that was needed to gain the increased membership and activists necessary to put up a good fight for the agreement. We had a meeting a couple of weeks later where our 90 Sodexo members attended. At this meeting we heard again how some workers had to take unpaid sick leave after contracting hospital acquired infections in their jobs. A few had even cancelled having operations because they couldn't afford to take the time off or had come back to work before being fully recovered. From that moment on the wheels of the juggernaut that is UNISON began to turn for us. The full time officer told the members to go back and recruit their non-union workmates. Within a couple of months membership had risen to over 200 (85% of all staff) and the number of Sodexo shop stewards had risen from one to five. The mood amongst the workers was becoming increasingly militant. UNISON, seeing the importance of this dispute, began to pour in the resources. The dispute became more than one between our members and Sodexo and their contracting Trust. It had become a signal to all other NHS Trusts and private contractors within hospitals that the implementation of this agreement would not wait any longer.



no pay freeze here: NHS strikers brave the snow

The Northern Devon Healthcare Trust finally agreed to meet with us in late 2009 but continued what appeared to be delaying tactics. They cancelled the long awaited talks in September. Sick of waiting for three years our members lodged an official dispute and called in ACAS. A second meeting was called for November. After the Trust also cancelled this, we voted for a strike ballot. It was clear that this was going to be the only way to get them to talk to us and achieve implementation. The workers themselves had pushed for this and now they had the full backing of the union.

The membership voted 97% for escalating strike action on a very high turn out. In the build up to the strike we set about a relentless campaign of media press releases and lobbies of the Trust board of directors. We even put up four 20 foot banners on the road up to the hospital. Within the hospital itself posters went up quicker than management could pull them down.

At one minute past midnight on 5th January UNISON members walked out and were greeted by the first pickets. By 5am the pickets and supporters had grown to 30 workers and the snow had begun to fall. By 10am there were well over 100 of us in the snow. To a tune of continuous beeping of car horns in support, it was a beautiful sight. One of the full time officers turned to me and said that though he was freezing, he was glad to be there to witness this. One of the trust directors threatened to call the police. He picked on one male picket and two female pickets close to retirement. He obviously didn't feel brave enough to tackle the mass of strikers at the main entrance. The police never arrived. I guess they probably told him to stop wasting their time.

Sodexo brought in scab labour from Hillingdon Hospital in London. This just enraged us more. They are actually on NHS terms and conditions themselves won for them by UNISON. They said that they will return when we strike again. Since going back to work the Trust and Sodexo have withdrawn their previous offer of part of the deal which was due to begin in January. This appears to be an act of retaliation. They have said that they will consider implementation in April if enough ‘efficiency savings’ i.e. job cuts can be identified. Doubtless to say we will be on strike again in the next few days. The employers have intimidated some of our stewards and members during this dispute but what they fail to realise is that it just makes us stronger.

The workers have been blown away by the messages of solidarity and pledges of financial support from other trade unions in Britain and around the world. It's a reminder of what working class solidarity can achieve.

★Messages of support can be sent to unisonhealthndevon@hotmail.co.uk. Donations will be very gratefully received and can be sent to ‘North Devon Health Branch Hardship Fund’, at Union Office, Suite 2, Munro House, North Devon District Hospital, Raleigh Park, Barnstaple, North Devon, EX31 4JB

no more no2eu? serwotka re-elected

In the last issue of *The Commune* we reported on the conference on working-class representation staged by the RMT rail workers' union, which appeared to endorse a general election campaign along the lines of the No2EU coalition which stood in the June 2009 European ballot.

However, the RMT executive has now voted for an election strategy largely based on securing the re-election of its existing parliamentary representatives, all of whom are in the Labour Party. In June the RMT had ploughed £45,000 into No2EU in exchange for a paltry 153,000 votes (1%), with no consultation among the union membership.

The Commune criticised No2EU not only as a diversion - wholly separate from RMT industrial struggles - but also for its nationalist and statist politics. However we have also advocated the RMT stick to its policy of calling an open, decision-making conference on workers' representation.

Mark Serwotka has been elected for a third term as general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services union after defeating right-wing challenger Rob Bryson by a near two-to-one margin.

Although clearly preferable to Bryson, a win for Serwotka also highlights the lack of a real alternative within PCS to challenge the left leadership: Independent Left appears to have collapsed.

The current civil service compensation scheme campaign appears to be reverting to type with a massive consultation exercise which was extremely well attended and was firm on backing industrial action in danger of being squandered as the union gets drawn into protracted talks. Only one members' briefing has been issued, which plays down industrial action in favour of talks and lawyers.

the commune

barack obama's first year in charge

by Ernie Haberkern
from Berkeley, California

The enormous enthusiasm that the election of the bright, well-spoken, African American woke in the liberal left is fading fast. Of course, much of that enthusiasm was a result of the justified revulsion provoked by the Cheney-Bush presidency and as that bad memory fades liberals are forced to face the current reality.

Nobody should be surprised. Obama was very clear, in his election campaign speeches, that withdrawal from Iraq was a precondition for a dramatic escalation of the war in Afghanistan. But I must admit that I was surprised when the Obama administration continued the Bush policy of bailing out the banks with no restrictions. Tim Geithner, the Obama administration's overseer was, for all intents and purposes, an office mate of Hank Paulson, Bush's appointee.

And the health care reform has become another bailout: this time for the insurance and pharmaceutical companies. They will receive an influx of cash from millions of new customers who will be forced by this legislation to enroll in their plans. Part of this will be paid for by unionised workers who traded wage increases for company financed health insurance

plans. They are now going to be taxed to help pay for the Obama plan. Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan has made teacher unions his main target. It is no accident that David Books, a conservative Republican columnist for the *New York Times* has become a big booster of Obama. He is, for all practical purposes, the moderate Republican people like Brooks have been looking for.

I can't leave this subject without saying a kind word for Sarah Palin. Her crack about "death panels" was exactly the kind of rhetoric that turns liberals on because it is so outrageous. But, in fact, the notion that Medicare costs are getting out of control because of expensive treatments in the last few months of life of terminally ill people is a subject that economists, liberal as well as conservative, have been writing about for years. And the current bill, House and Senate versions alike, will institute controls on such treatments. It is not a problem with a simple solution but it is disingenuous to dismiss the fears of ordinary citizens that government bureaucracy will not necessarily act in their interest.

I think the best place to start in analyzing the Obama phenomenon is to look at the comparison often made with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Here too was a politician with-

out much of a record who, in a moment of crisis, roused the electorate with his rhetoric (demagogy?) and radically changed American politics for good and ill. The question is: why has Obama so signally failed to make any significant change in the political and economic life of the nation?

The answer is that when Roosevelt was elected there was a powerful opposition movement in the country. The socialist and communist parties had a significant following and they were very influential in the massive explosion of trade union unrest exemplified by the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations. That opposition forced, and allowed, Roosevelt to take far more radical steps than he would have been able to had these forces not existed. There is a story, probably apocryphal like most good stories, of a private meeting between Roosevelt and a leader of the popular movement. In the version I heard the leader was A. Phillip Randolph leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. According to the story Roosevelt ended the conversation with the remark "I think your proposal is excellent. Now, go out there and make me do it!" Unfortunately, the US of A is very short on people like A. Phillip Randolph and the movements that created them right now.

a new left for a new decade

by Steve Ryan

So it's 2010 and the media is full of reflections on the last decade. Looking at it from the point of view of the left it's an interesting one. Massive marches against war, the rise of the BNP, the collapse of pretty well all initiatives to build an alternative to Labour. The rise and fall of left led unions alongside occupations and wildcat strikes, climate camps and environmental protests, the list goes on and in many respects shows the Left on the defensive.

Depressing? Actually no. Looking at the areas of hope in the last 10 years is a lesson for the future.

Whilst the left struggled to form a new workers' party to the left of Labour and failed, the anti-capitalist movement of movements largely prospered. Innovative actions around the G summits, climate camp, the return of horizontal structures and consensus decision making, clearly challenged the establishment, and impacted the public consciousness around the need to take climate change seriously.

Whilst even the most left wing unions called off well supported strikes at the hint of a minor concession, workers occupied factories and took wildcat action. Trade councils are on the rise and the National Shop Stewards Network gets stronger.

Whilst the western labour movement conceded huge ground to capitalism, including now under a recession with unions accepting pay cuts cap in hand and social democratic governments cutting public services and privatising, in Latin America worker self-managed factories arose and got involved in participatory budgets.

What does this teach us?

Whilst clearly the Left has been battered over the last 30 years and has been on the defensive, that defensiveness is now in danger of being ingrained. All struggles are seen to some degree as hanging on to existing terms, conditions etc. Fine in itself, but without making the case for why this is, and more importantly making demands to extend these, workers tend to get to a stage of passivity.

We clearly need a workers' movement that has a vision of the society it desires. In the meantime it is time to start to think in a proactive manner, to give a glimpse of what that society might mean. Clearly if some demands are met this usually gives workers confidence, and can be built on. All struggles should be widened out politically, something again much of the left has been reluctant to do for some time.

Transitional demands are always good. As there is a recession and we all know there is money to go round, instead of

accepting pay cuts or even pay adjustments around the rate of inflation (why are they called rises?) workers should be fighting claims based on what they feel they need to improve their standard of living .

On top of this with millions out of work and the advances in technology and a long hours culture, why is there not a mass movement for more leisure time instead? Most unions have a policy for a 35 hour week but few have taken it seriously. Given where we are in the 21st century should there not be a call for a 30 hour week, paid sabbaticals as a right and more leave?

As regards workers' self management few but The Commune are actively promoting this, yet in the 1970s the debate was mainstream as can be seen from some of the articles published by The Commune on debates between Solidarity and the Institute for Workers' Control. Fast forward to 2010 and it is Tessa Jowell, yes that's her, setting up a commission to look at mutuality and co-operative ownership in the public sector. OK we can all spend hours pointing out that this isn't about self management etc... but the fact is that the debate is now out there, and the left should be there arguing the case for real workers' self management.

an alternative to the age of austerity

by Chris Ford

The new decade began with *The Times* predicting an "age of austerity" in the UK which will last for years. We can expect, they said, cuts in public spending to offset the Treasury budget deficit of £178 billion, caused to a large extent by the bank bailouts after the September 2008 crisis.

The view that the financial sector is at the roots of our current predicament is not restricted to the bourgeois papers like *The Times*. This view is common amongst liberal, Labour Party and socialist opinion. John Cruddas and a hundred other MPs are campaigning for a High Pay Commission, arguing our current predicament was caused by "greed", as banking and executive salaries grew excessively. There is certainly widespread bitter resentment amongst working class people that we are paying for a loan to rescue the banks. Cruddas appears like a philanthropist from a Dickens Christmas story coming along to help the poor, making the rich share the pain of the recession. But state controls on high pay would only scratch the surface of the crisis: we need something far more fundamental.

The problem is not the capitalists as individuals but the social and economic system - *capitalism*. What controls the economy is not the Treasury, the City or company managers – it is the laws by which this system operates, which work independent of anyone's will or intentions.

Capitalists are constantly looking for ways to keep down costs whilst expanding production at the same time to create more profits. But for all their efforts this system is prone to a tendency of the rate of profit to fall. It is also prone to a recurring debt crisis as capitalists borrow not only to invest

but to repay previous debts. Over recent decades the finance sector of the economy expanded massively beyond the actual flow of value being generated in the "real economy", like an elastic band reality caught up and it snapped with the "credit crunch" in September 2008. The whole system is fragile, as *The Times* noted: "there was a serious prospect that the entire Western financial system would fail. Without the lifeblood of access to credit, the economy might have suffered not just a bitter recession but a repeat of the misery and penury of the Great Depression."

The Times asserts that state intervention "appears to have worked in its immediate aim. But the side-effects are severe." The "severity" is the burden of austerity which will now be placed on majority of the population – the working class. But worse, there is no guarantee that the *de facto* nationalisation of capitalist bankruptcy will offset a further crisis of equal or worse impact.

The remedies paraded before us in the coming months by Tory, Labour and Liberal politicians will all agree on the fundamental need to keep the system afloat and in one way or another introduce austerity policies to cope with the Treasury budget deficit. They will all assist employers introducing tougher measures at work against their workforce.

How can workers respond? We have a large trade union movement: although we are hindered by union bureaucrats, it does have real potential: the power to say 'no!' No, you can't introduce a pay freeze, or a new sickness management policy, no, you can't introduce a new process to make us work more for less pay. To get our union movement actually engaged in such things would be a big step forward, and a necessary one in the coming "age of austerity".

But whilst workers have immense potential power, we have no control over the places we work other than by the pressure we can bring to bear on employers. It would be a step forward to be able to stand up to management and stop them in their tracks, but still, we are not the managers; there is no democracy at work or in the economy.

The coming general election will not give us any say on these questions, it will be dominated by a politicians and a media who will manipulate a debate all premised on an acceptance of capitalism.

Communists say all the solutions in offer are inadequate, we need to organise our struggles not against this or that aspect of the system, or solely on ameliorating capitalist society or nationalising it as state-socialists propose. We need to fight against – and uproot – *capital* itself, *value* production itself.

Against the tyranny which exists in the economy and the sham of parliamentary democracy run by corrupt MPs communists advocate workers' self-management across society. A system of participatory democracy based on the sovereignty of those who produce the good and services in society, covering every community, factory, office and workplace. Instead of state or private ownership we advocate a genuine social ownership, organised on the basis of workers self-management.

We counterpose communal self-government to the current system where every aspect of life is increasingly becoming a commodity. This is a daunting task, but as a goal, it offers a solution to the age of austerity.

no answers from copenhagen climate summit

by Mark Ellingsen

Climate change rose to the top of the news agenda during the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, only to be displaced by the cold weather spell now being experienced in the British Isles. No doubt climate sceptics will be pointing to this as proof that global warming is a myth, despite the fact that globally the last decade was the warmest since 1850. Furthermore, the upward trend is unmistakable.

The consequences will have a significant adverse impact on human well-being and the ecology of the planet, which will be exacerbated by social, political and economic inequality. By 2050, increasing areas of the planet will be affected by drought, and water availability will decrease in those areas dependent on melt water from the major mountain ranges which includes one sixth of the world's population. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimate that between 20-30% of plant and animal species will be in danger of extinction if the global temperature exceeds 1.5°C and 2.0°C. Given that the lowest best estimate is a rise of 1.8°C by 2100 this now seems inevitable. While the IPCC predict that there may be some possibility that crop yields may increase in higher latitudes at this temperature range, it is likely to decrease in lower latitudes which will exacerbate food shortages in these regions.

Furthermore the increasing acidification of the oceans due to absorption of carbon dioxide is likely to exacerbate problems with the use of the oceans as part of the human food supply. It is also expected that coastal and low lying areas will be at increased risk of permanent flooding. However, it is worth noting that the IPCC has been criticised for its conservatism in both its estimates of the likely scenarios for climate change as well as its impacts. For example, Arctic sea ice is melting faster than the IPCC model predicts.

It was in this context that world leaders met in Copenhagen for the summit. It is widely recognised that the lack of an agreement at the Copenhagen Summit on legally binding commitments to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases (measured in equivalent carbon dioxide CO₂e) was at very least a disappointment and for many a disaster which threatens the sustainability of life on the planet. Much has been written about the reasons for the failure to come to a binding agreement and in particular on the role of the West in attempting to maintain its economic dominance and the role of China and India in trying to ensure that they would continue along the path of economic growth.

However, while it is understandable that geopolitical rivalry may make it difficult to come to an agreement, what is truly remarkable is the lack of will to guarantee the medium to long term reproduction of the global economy, let alone the well-being of humanity and the sustainability of the plane-



police arrested well in excess of 1,000 protestors during the copenhagen climate summit

tary ecosystem. Surely this can only be attributed to the pressure which world leaders are under to maintain economic growth in the short term in the hope of maintaining economic and political stability. Secondly, there is a lot of confusion within ruling class circles and orthodox economists about the best way to deal with climate change while at the same time not disrupting the global economy, a task which may prove impossible. That world 'leaders' may still come up with some legally binding and verifiable measures is still possible but alarmingly there is every possibility that they will fail to do so.

A political response by the global working class to the impending upheaval and possible catastrophe in the longer term is practically non-existent. To some extent this reflects the current low-level of independent working class engagement in politics but it is also a reflection of the fact that the left is finding it difficult to translate the effects of climate change into meaningful politics which resonates with working people. Of course, the most immediate response will come from those who will be imminently affected by the changes, for example, those living in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Vietnam) and most notably in parts of China, particularly around the industrial region of Guangdong. But the changes will also have a notable effect in California and Australia with both being susceptible to prolonged droughts. Workers and other classes in these regions, such as the peasantry, are likely to be at the forefront of any struggle against the threat to both their lives and their livelihood from these changes. One way to build awareness amongst workers less immediately affected by

these changes is to build solidarity campaigns with those in struggle for more just solutions to effects of climate change. Environmental justice will become one of the key issues over the next few decades.

In the British Isles we are more likely to see water shortages, rising food prices and energy bills, and possibly higher taxes as governments enforce the economic costs of climate change onto the working class. Some coastal areas will be liable to flooding which may lead to struggles over land use and housing. We are likely to be dragged into more wars as ruling classes try to counter political instability and clash over access to resources. However, the most profound effect is likely to be felt through a faltering global economy based around consumerism. In the short-term it is likely that capitalism will recover from the global recession but it is not at all obvious that in the long-term it can sustain an economic model based around consumerism in the minority of capitalist countries and export led growth in the rest of the world.

It seems increasingly likely that the legacy of capitalism to future generations will not be the development of the productive forces but the ecological collapse of the planet. The vision that the left have to provide is not one based on economic growth but on the quality of life built on a sustainable relationship with the environment. Consumer led capitalism is increasingly looking like a dead-end and this has major implications for the working class in Europe and North America, implications which will become more visible over the next few decades.

islamic republic mark II: theocracy with a smiley face?

by Nathan Coombs

In the *Guardian* Simon Tisdall recently asked whether the bloody protests we are currently witnessing on the streets of Iran herald a 'second revolution?'

All the trademark signs seem to be there. Much like in the run-up to 1979 the protests are beginning to move in cycles locked into the mourning rituals of those who have died in support of the cause; all too familiar are the scenes of the streets filling with masses openly defying authority – which with every fumbling attempt at repression only loosen their legitimacy and hold on power.

And yet with all the excitement the differences between what is currently playing out on the streets in 2009 and the revolution of 1979 seem to be being missed. It is admittedly hard at this point to measure what success for the green movement would exactly mean (they appear to be now just fighting for the space to exist); but those differences do not bode well for the hopes of a second revolution and radical change in the country, even if the movement were to reach a tipping point of strength in their favour.

Firstly, no one denies that what is underway is a split within factions of the regime, rather than an outright challenge to the regime itself – although the two appear closely related. On the one side we have supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini and presidential incumbent Mahmoud Ahmedinijad; on the other, presidential challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi and his rich backer Rafsanjani. All are squarely situated within the tradition of the Islamic Republic; and even the recently deceased 'dissident' Ayatollah Montazeri could not have been considered dangerous to the premises of theocracy, despite his criticisms of Iran's human rights record. It is also worth noting that Mousavi parted on good



workers have no allies among the theocrats

terms with Ayatollah Khomeini after eight years as prime minister (1981-89) – during which time tens of thousands were sent out across the trenches in suicidal, martyrdom missions in the Iran-Iraq war, and thousands of political opponents were executed in mass purges.

Second, whereas in 1979 there was a multitude of groups all working for decades plotting the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty and creatively theorising strategy and ideology (the Tudeh Party and the Fidayeen and Mujadidden guerrilla units, amongst others), today it is not clear what the green movement stand for other than vague reforms. The urban, educated and cosmopolitan backers of the protest movement demand change, but keep their cards close to their chest as to what this means in concrete terms. As we have recently witnessed with Obama's presidency, promises of change in the absence of any specifics often end up ringing very hollow when new leaders rise to power with few commitments pledged to the mass movement who brought them there. Third is the question of the green movement's draping themselves with religion. The famous Iranian philoso-

pher and influential ideologue of the 1979 revolution, Ali Shari'ati, is an inspiration. Equally eulogised and reviled by the authorities in the Islamic Republic, Shari'ati is an icon for proposing an ideology which appeared to allow one to be all the following at the same time – a revolutionary, an Islamist, a secularist, a Marxist, a mystic, and a rebel. Behind the green movement's latching onto Islam is the belief that any secular movement will never gain mass support; and Shari'ati provides a way to think using political Islam for progressive purposes.

But in using Montazeri's funeral as a focal point for protest, the instrumentalisation of religious authority to legitimate the movement crosses into territory which would have been antithetical to Shari'ati. Shari'ati's Islam can only be described as a form of reformationist political religion; it actively denigrated Islamic, Shia institutions and all they stand for. There is a thus continuum between the opposites of Shari'ati Islam and Khomeini's fundamentalist Islam, and using the mourning of Ayatollah Montazeri (an enthusiastic advocate of theocracy) to advance the green movement's cause pushes their location an uncomfortable further inch towards Khomeini's end of the spectrum.

The peril of the green movement's strategy therefore appears to consist in the following catch 22: the more they anchor their movement in figures, motifs and traditions indigenous to the Islamic Republic the more legitimacy they appear to have. But that legitimacy comes at a price: it means that even if successful the green movement might only succeed in empowering one faction of the Islamic Republic, ushering in meek reforms, and legitimating theocracy with a smiley face – Islamic Republic Mark II. If the level of compromise is too great it might take decades for a more radical opposition to theocracy to take root.

the road to oil: hope and fear in congo

★War-torn eastern Congo is preparing for another natural resource struggle: this time for two billion barrels of oil at Lake Albert. Controversial British companies are set to play a defining role.

by Taimour Lay

from Democratic Republic of Congo

To travel the warped, pot-holed road east from Bunia, the war-torn capital of Ituri, eastern DRC, to the shores of Lake Albert, is to follow a trail of old enmity and blood. The first town you pass is Bogoro, site of one of the most notorious massacres of the Congolese civil war (1998-2003) – 200 civilians killed in just a few hours on 24th February 2003, a crime for which militia leader Germain Katanga is now facing trial at the International Criminal Court in the Hague. Then the placid coastal village of Tchomia on 31st May: 250 killed. Next the town of Kasenyi: another 100 lives lost.

On the opposite shore, 40km from Congolese Kasenyi, you can glimpse the vast escarpment of the Ugandan side of the lake, where oil production is due to start in 2011. Two British companies, Tullow Oil and Heritage, the former backed by a billion pound loan arranged by the Royal Bank of Scotland, the latter owned by Tony Buckingham, a former mercenary and associate of Simon Mann, share the licenses and have bought rights in Congo too. The disputed international border runs right down the middle of the water. A mile here or there, west or east, didn't used to matter so much; now every inch means potential revenue to Kinshasa or Kampala.

The communities of eastern Ituri, eking out a living from the dwindling fish stocks on the lake, found themselves at the frontline ten years ago: in scenes of ethnic slaughter and child-soldiery that shocked the world into intervention. Today, the UN mission (MONUC) maintains an uneasy equilibrium, backing President Joseph Kabila and the hotch-potch of former rebels who make up the national army (FARDC), but doing so with little hope that a functioning state is being built. Kabila's picture may be prominently displayed on the walls of local officialdom, but Kinshasa feels very far away.

The end of the 40km dirt-road is an expanse of perfect blue: water and sky and new possibilities. Lake Albert runs for 100km north to south, dotted everywhere with wooden fishing boats. An estimated two billion barrels of oil beneath the surface make this a new frontline; the latest natural resource to offer hope, and fear, to local communities. "They have fought over everything," one man says. "Why should oil be any different?"

There is a perversely satisfying logic as you explore the map of conflict here. Eastern Congo is often presented as a kind of medieval chaos, fuelled by brutal rivalries beyond the rational, ethnic Hema pitted against Lendu in a perpetual cycle of violence. But more material explanations are not hard to find. "A battle was fought there," you are told, a finger pointing down to a lush, green valley. It could be north Wales on a sunny day. Why? "The timber from the forest". "A massacre there. Charcoal." "The militia was based here. Gold."

Tullow are the latest darlings of the FTSE, with Chief Executive Aidan Heavey, who pocketed over £30m in 2008 alone, regularly profiled by the Times as a 'business bigshot to watch'. Heritage – whose directors and associates are an extended family of diamond dealers and military contractors, are a classic "wildcat" company - prospectors who buy up licences in "risky" places, looking to sell on for a huge profit before production even starts. It is set to make \$1.6bn from passing its Uganda deals onto ENI later this year. No one expects them to be around when oil flows in DRC either. It's been the same in the mining industry here – 'trading companies' cut deals and then leave, sometimes only making way yet another wildcat. Speculation, not production, is the money-maker.

The last time the oil companies visited Ituri was in 2007, when Tullow Oil's Vice President for Africa, Tim O'Hanlon, came to Kasenyi. That summer Uganda and DRC nearly went to war after a series of clashes on the lake. A Heritage Oil worker was killed by the Congolese army. There is a photo of O'Hanlon standing next to the town 'chef', or head of administration. He squints and smiles uncomfortably in the bright light, a bringer of promises in a pale suit: schools and hospitals and a prosperous future.

Others have dropped in with more than words. MONUC reported later that year that Heritage had donated speed boats to the FARDC in March and had also been responsible for the delivery of 30 Land Rover jeeps to Bunia, which were then distributed to local commanders across Ituri in an attempt to curry favour.



a refugee camp in 2008: nearly four million people died in the 1998-2003 war and a further 5.4 million were displaced in DRC and neighbouring burundi, rwanda, tanzania and uganda

It wasn't until 2006 that Tullow and Heritage signed a production sharing agreement with Kabila, only to see the contract ripped up a year later as the government sought new partners in a South African consortium. As the companies have worked towards the start of production on the Uganda side of the lake, they remain mired in a political and legal battle with Kinshasa.

But it hasn't only been Kinshasa that Heritage has spoken to. Back in 2002, just as they signed a first memorandum of understanding with DRC, Heritage admitted to seeking consent to the deals in writing from the rebel leaders then in control of Ituri and North Kivu: the MLC of Jean-Pierre Bemba, and the RCD-Kis/ML of Mbusa Nyamwisi.

An influential 2005 report from the Pole Institute noted that manoeuvrings by militias were at least partly being determined by considerations of future oil deals. "Since [the Heritage deal in 2002], the two movements lost control of some of the most interesting parts of the concession - hardly a coincidence. New masters of Ituri until March 2003 were the Hema fighters of the rebel movement UPC (Union des Patriotes Congolais)."

“In Uganda, it's an open secret that the ruling party is hoping to fund its 2011 election campaign with oil-company bribes.”

UPC foreign minister Jean-Baptiste Dhetchuvi said at the time: "In Ituri, we are in an oil war. When you look at the oil map of Lake Albert region and compare it to the massacre map, there really is a strange similarity."

The rebel threat now has a new face. The FPJC (Front Populaire pour Justice au Congo) operates only 50km south of Kasenyi. Their savvy political operation has already begun to talk the language of oil. "Our movement exists to protect the natural resources of Ituri," a sharp-suited rebel tells me. "Kinshasa cannot sign contracts and pursue oil exploration without consulting the communities. And we represent the communities."

In Tchomia, local people are in no doubt that oil will bring risks but question the claims of the *miliciens*. After all, they've heard this sort of rhetoric before. "If the FPJC are here to protect Ituri, why are they out every day robbing people on the roads?" a fisherman asks.

Reliable reports of heavy weapons being delivered to FPJC positions by helicopter in 2009 have heightened suspicions that at least one regional actor is providing support for the fighters. FPJC leaders operate freely in Kampala. Reported discoveries of gold in FPJC areas open up the possibility of backing from parts of the Ugandan military in exchange for a share of the profits – the old pattern of state collusion and corruption that fuelled the previous war.

The contractual wrangle between Tullow/Heritage and the South African consortium (made up of four companies: Petro SA, SacOil, H-Oil and Divine Inspiration) won't be resolved until Kabila chooses between them. As a veteran observer in Kinshasa put it, "It's always about money." The new companies claim to have paid over \$6m in bonuses for

two exploration blocks and show little sign of backing down.

Tullow continue to lobby hard. O'Hanlon was back in Kinshasa in October 2009, where he received, according to one well-placed observer, "an eyebrow-raising amount of diplomatic support" from the UK Ambassador, Nick Kay, and maintained his company's position that the 2006 contract should stand. Heritage are quieter – but continue to boast to London markets of their "high-level political connections" – a euphemism for the influence money buys them across Africa. In Uganda, it's an open secret that the ruling party is hoping to fund its 2011 election campaign with oil-company bribes.

We obtained copies of the confidential contracts in December 2009, revealing that the companies have evaded virtually all legal and environmental responsibilities. Moreover, the state's share of future revenues is strikingly low; though even if that changes, there's little hope that the money which reaches Kinshasa will then trickle down to local people. The deals in Uganda, also leaked last year, are little better.

Meanwhile, in eastern Ituri, the machinations of political networks are beyond people's control. They allow themselves to hope that oil will at least bring a new road or a health centre, though there are few illusions. "We just don't want to be another Niger Delta," a local politician says.

On the journey back to Bunia, we pass a pile of innocuous, broken stones. The driver jumps out eagerly to direct me to the roadside. This used to be the site of a 10ft two-pillared monument to Henry Morton Stanley, he says. During the last of his great militarized expeditions in 1887, Stanley cut east through the then unknown Ituri rainforest, to 'rescue' Emin Pasha, the governor of southern Sudan, isolated at Lake Albert following the Mahdi revolt.

In 1982, two men came by horse from the lake and dismantled the valuable white stone, carrying it off precariously in the middle of the night. As a blow to *muzungu* (white man) triumphalism; against the explorer who negotiated concessions for Leopold II? My impromptu tour guide laughs. 'No politics. Just to sell the material! This is Congo. It's always about money.'

the eastern bloc and after

The latest pamphlet produced by The Commune looks at the regimes which existed in the Eastern Bloc and the state of the working class in those countries today.

The pamphlet features a symposium of critical Marxists from Hungary, Russia, Ukraine, and Bosnia on the twentieth anniversary of the historic events of 1989-91 and the lessons for communists today.

£1 + 50p postage each: use form and address on p.12 or email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

does recession stifle resistance?

by Sheila Cohen

NUJ Book Branch

It is difficult in the midst of the current "double dip" recession to predict whether further struggles will follow the Vestas and Visteon occupations, or indeed the less obviously recession-related struggles of engineering construction workers, Leeds refuse collectors and postal workers - not to mention current disputes affecting airline employees, tube workers and bus drivers.

It has never been straightforward, historically, to work out whether recessions spark resistance or dampen it. The arguments are obvious on both sides of the coin - capitalist crisis can spur struggle through anger and desperation or suppress it through the terrible fear of job loss.

For some academics, the answer lies in a satisfyingly neat analysis of history in terms of "long waves" of capitalist economic development, which can in turn be linked to cycles of worker resistance. Although long wave theory is itself uninspiring, it has been developed by some industrial relations writers, notably John Kelly, to show that strike waves *can* happen in a downturn.

The Great Upheaval

Perhaps the first upsurge of struggle under capitalism was Chartism, which began about ten years before the first recognised capitalist upswing in the late 1840s and culminated in the 1842 General Strike. A more characteristically industrial struggle was the quasi-insurrectionary strike wave which began in the United States in July 1877 after a series of local strikes - most without trade union support - dating back as far as 1873-4.

This "Great Upheaval" occurred bang in the middle of what has been classed as a "downswing" - hardly surprising, since its origins dated from the massive slump of 1873. Yet the catastrophic economic circumstances seem hardly to have dampened the spirit of the strikers. Herbert Gutman writes: "Three and a half years of severe depression ignited a series of local brush fires into a national conflagration."

By July 19th 1877, troops were sent to Martinburg, Maryland, where the dispute had exploded due to workers' rejection of their union's "moderate" response and the massive support the strikers received from local people, who helped them fight the state militia.

The conflict began to spread rapidly through the country, to New York State, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and ultimately as far as Texas and the whole American West. In one Pennsylvania railway town "a remarkable transfer of power took place ...Economic management and political power had in effect been taken over by the strikers."

The Great Dock Strike

The "downswing" which followed the 1873 slump lasted right into the early 1890s - which again covers a period of major working-class upsurge symbolised by the British matchworkers' and dockers' strikes and a wave of unionisation amongst – hitherto unorganised – unskilled workers.

In many ways this new "movement" can be credited to a conscious strategy of challenging the then stifling hold of craft unionism by leaders like Tom Mann and Benn Tillet. But like the Great Upheaval it also arose from employers' desperate efforts to alleviate the impact of depression by attacking workers' conditions. As John Charlton's vivid history points out, the "long period of uncertainty commencing with the onset of Depression in 1873" saw "a battery of solutions" attempted by the ruling class ranging from imperial conquest and other forms of export of capital to, more significantly for our present purposes, "intense technical and managerial innovation", including a significant shift of investment away from land towards capital investment. This meant massive rural depopulation and thus intense competition for unskilled jobs in the cities, creating insecurity, poverty and intensified demands in the workplace.

However, workplace conflict was nothing new for Bryant and May "girls" (in their very early teens if not younger). Even in 1871, after the announcement of a match tax threatening their jobs, the matchworkers and their working-class supporters "surged out of the East End in a vast march on Parliament which ended with a brutal battle with police in Trafalgar Square"; in 1882, after Theodore Bryant deducted a shilling from their meagre wages as a contribution to erecting a statue of Gladstone, the workers armed themselves with stones and bricks and surrounded the statue at its unveiling in a militant protest.

The matchworkers' 1888 strike lasted three solid weeks before they were persuaded back to work with a "face-saving compromise" brokered by the London Trades Council secretary. We cannot write its epitaph better than Charlton: "...the strike is not just of historic interest. It is an absolutely critical example of how after decades of low struggle and disappointment a militant movement can revive. Its

genesis could come from the most unpredictable and apparently unpromising source. Call centre personnel? Super-market till staff? Well, not in 1888! It was 12 to 15 year old kids in the match industry!"

The following year's "Great Dock Strike" was not unrelated, given the strong family and class ties in the historic East End. However, the dispute began with a relatively minor catalyst, a form of piecework known as the "plus" system which effectively denied dockers bonus payments for extra tonnage moved. Workers walked out after a "plus"-related dispute on board a ship called the "Lady Armstrong", and the Great Strike, itself carrying a vast cargo of grievances, was on.

Despite widespread solidarity, the strike was however marked by the early stirrings of an emerging bureaucratic approach in the unions. A statement "strongly deprecating" the rash action taken by unorganised workers not directly connected with the dock work of coming out on strike... was swiftly issued by the official strike committee, and an explicit general strike call a few days later was dismissed by strike leaders, including Tom Mann, at the behest of "moderate elements", such as Cardinal Manning.

The Great Unrest

While the 1890s to World War One are defined as an economic "upswing" a fascinating study of Glasgow workers demonstrates that a number of "dips" occurred during that same period, influencing workplace experience. "The years 1908 to 1910 were years of intense economic depression on Clydeside, as elsewhere in Britain, with massive rises in unemployment levels...", while the period as a whole saw increasing "strategies to control [the] workforce and to maximise productivity [through] deskilling, speeding-up production and intensifying workloads. Such policies could be used to hold down wages" through manipulation of piecework.

The study also shows that worker upsurge can often be related to upswings immediately *after* such temporary slumps. Grassroots militancy increased even before the major period of the Great Unrest: "As the economy improved after the deep 1908-9 depression workers increasingly took unofficial action".

The 1911 Singer sewing machine workers' strike is of particular interest in demonstrating the massive impact of "Taylor"-style work intensification on semi-skilled factory workers. It demonstrated the bankruptcy of predictions as to the "docility" of certain workers, in particular women. "The dispute which arose quite spontaneously in the polishing dept of the Singer plant at Clydebank triggered a strike which escalated rapidly to assume major proportions". And the issue? A work squad of 15 polishers had been reduced to 12, and piece-rates cut. By the second day, the majority of the 11,000-strong female workforce had struck in solidarity with the polishers - in a company with "no history of labour militancy like this".

While Singer was US-owned and therefore more likely to employ the draconian work intensification techniques pioneered by Taylor, the push towards such discipline came from capital's attempts to restore profitability in the wake of the first great slump of the system, 1873. The lesson thus again appears to be not that workers will resist or retreat as a reaction to such upswings and downswings per se, but in terms of the impact capital's response to these has on workers' own concrete experience of labour power, labour process and labour market.

The Great Depression

The wave of rank and file organising which took place in the mid-1930s in the US adopted many forms which were quasi-revolutionary, or at least syndicalist, in character. Four major waves of struggle - "longshoremen" (dockers), Toledo Auto-Lite workers, Minneapolis Teamsters and textile workers in the south - were matched by magnificent sit-down strikes by rubber workers in Akron, Ohio, General Motors workers in Flint, Michigan and, perhaps most astounding of all, "a virtual sitdown wave" in Detroit involving bakery, textile, metal manufacturing, retail and auto workers. Overall, "in the wake of the General Motors strike, people throughout the country began sitting down... the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded sit-downs involving nearly 400,000 workers in 1937".

Again much of this unrest and organisation was rooted in relatively "mundane" issues. In the case of the longshoremen "their greatest grievance was the shape-up, a system of hiring that [they] referred to as the 'slave market'...When the [union] made no attempt to challenge [this], the more militant workers began forming a rank and file movement." The textile workers' conflict was rooted in an employer imposition known as the "stretch-out" in which workers were required to work twelve rather than eight spindles, and crews of four carders were reduced to three. The rubber workers' revolt was typified by a walkout of tyre makers at

one company against piece rate changes introduced as part of the Taylorist "Bedaux" system. Speed-up was also rife in the auto industry, playing a central role in sparking sit-down occupations in 1936-7.

All this potentially revolutionary activity, involving workers seizing and occupying units of capital worth billions of dollars, took place in a country seen - even more in the 1930s than in the 1870s - as dominated by an ideology of individualism and "opportunity". Another parallel is that this upsurge also was rooted entirely in the rank and file of the movement, many new to union organisation, and largely repudiated by that movement's "leadership".

The 1968-74 upsurge

We finish this overview with the most recent significant upsurge, from struggles across the industrialised world in 1968, to the 1974 near-revolution in Portugal. The period was widely considered across left and right to be a precursor of systemic change.

So what was happening in the economy? The late 1960s were no period of major recession; the broad "long waves" presented by Kelly have "World War Two to early 70s" as an upswing, although 1967-1975 is characterised as a "transition period". British capital was already considerably worried about its productivity and profitability levels as the upsurge got underway. In 1969 the Labour government made a determined, but unsuccessful, attempt to put legal curbs on both unofficial and official strikes, while 1974 saw the launch of its perhaps more ideologically damaging "Social Contract" deal with union leaderships. However, for the first three or four years of the "upsurge", no taint of bureaucracy sullied the uproarious wave of working class struggle which spread from engineering and car production to broader groups of workers including refuse collectors (a "dirty jobs strike" was staged in 1969), low-paid hospital workers and white-collar groups.

The beginning of the "upsurge" can be located in the closing years of the post-war boom, while 1973-4 saw a significant recession across the capitalist world, response to which formed the beginnings of the fatal neo-liberal revolt less than a decade later. Yet levels of grass-roots resistance and militancy, at least in Britain, changed little during the period. In 1974, the first year of the Social Contract and, according to some on the left, the marker of a significant downturn in struggle, a wave of unofficial strikes provided a raucous response to Labour's attempts to discipline the working class.

All of this activity was again distinguished by its character as a "revolt from below" in which the affront to capital was almost equally a rude gesture to the established union leadership. Yet again, the roots of this upsurge of militancy lay in workers' *experience* - one of ever-increasing exploitation and intensification of labour - rather than in some conscious response to economic upturn, capitalist injustice or any other broad-brush aspect of the system confronting them. Rather, the process worked the other way – starting from workplace resistance, developing towards alternative ways of looking at the world.

And today?

So we see that recession per se does not automatically act as a brake on worker struggle. Of the five major worker upsurges reviewed here, three - the US upheaval, the 1889 dock strike and the US 1930s sitdowns - took place during major "downswings".

Indeed, one of the lessons not only of the struggles surveyed but of less conspicuous periods of worker activity is that it is an explosive, essentially unpredictable process which often confounds the careful "lines" and "programmes" adopted by sympathetic organisations.

The lessons of history seem not to consist of neat links between economic upswings and periods of increased trade union strength and influence, but one of a ragged, essentially unpredictable series of furious struggles against the depredations of capitalism, often by previously unorganised groups of workers. The Prisme and Vestas occupations in 2009, staged by workers previously indifferent or hostile to trade unionism, are eloquent testimony to this dynamic. So too was the militancy and activism of Visteon workers who, although unionised, had little previous experience of struggle.

In such circumstances, and in the midst of grinding recession, the classical Marxist judgement of workers having "nothing to lose" acquires new resonance, and indeed I can do no better to conclude with the words of a Visteon steward active in the occupation: "The feeling was tremendously exciting - taking back that little bit of control after having everything taken away from us. And the thing is we knew we had nothing to lose, because we'd already lost everything, and so as far as we were concerned it was: 'We can't lose - we can only win'."

trades union congress: no saviours from on high

by Clifford Biddulph

When the Communication Workers' Union executive unanimously called off the postal strike on the government's terms without an agreement, the continuing success of the employer's neoliberal offensive was due in no small measure to the behind the scenes role of Brendan Barber and the Trades Union Congress. Barber had previously played a part in encouraging the CWU leadership to accept the neo-liberal 'modernisation' agenda in principle.

The leader of the TUC was not acting as an advocate of the trade union movement or the interests of workers but as a servant of the state. Tony Blair once described the leader of the TUC as a government colleague.

But it would be more accurate to use John McIlroy's assessment that "the TUC acts not as an alternative to the state, but as an arm of the state". Recently millions of pounds of money has been poured into the TUC to provide services for the government including the recent supply-side skills training to promote business productivity. Jobs are linked to the success of free-market enterprise. The TUC echo New Labour propaganda about partnership between employers and trade unions which covers up the unequal relationship between capital and labour. In hiding the dominance of the employers the ideology of partnership helps to provide the bosses with the whip hand.

Historically the TUC was not an organisation formed as part of the class struggle against capital. It emerged as the parliamentary committee of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council in 1868 as a respectable voice to influence parliamentarians to moderate anti-union legislation. Its aim was to form parliamentary opinion, not fight the state. In 1919 when there was an explosion of workers' militancy of revolutionary proportions, the TUC parliamentary committee became the TUC General Council but, despite illusions to the contrary, did not become the general staff of labour. The great labour unrest of 1910-1914 had owed nothing to the direction of the TUC and everything to the creativity of workers in unofficial channels. The fight for New Unionism at the end of the 19th century or the struggle for mass trade unions outside the narrow craft unions was led by communists such as Eleanor Marx who in effect led the gasworkers' union. William Morris described the policy of the TUC at the time as contemptuous inactivity.

The true nature of the TUC was plainly exposed in 1926 when the General Council, frightened by the solid response to its call for a national strike, called it off after nine days before the General Strike could develop a momentum of its



the TUC were keen to get posties 'back to work'

own outside the tight bureaucratic straitjacket of the official movement. The miners were left isolated to go down to defeat in their defensive battle for 'not a penny off the pay, not a second on the day' in response to the government and employers' demand for wage cuts to solve their economic crisis. The miners' principled demand was cynically dismissed by the General Council as a mere slogan. When Stanley Baldwin, the then prime minister, rhetorically asked the council if they were ready to take over, the response of Jimmy Thomas, who was the NUM leader and a leading member of the General Council was a heart felt cry of 'God help us if we did'.

The TUC decision to call off the strike on the government's terms, without any gains, was unanimous. Yet the Communist Party of Great Britain and the national Minority Movement looked to the top of the official movement, particularly the left leaders who had been friendly to the Soviet Union. Their tactic was to put pressure or demands on the TUC. 'All power to the TUC' was their slogan. The CPGB stuck close to the officials and their structures. The instructions of the Minority Movement to its members in workplaces and trades councils was to carry out the instructions of the General Council and union executives and on no account to take over the functions of the official movement. Peter Kerrigan, a leading member of the CPGB and chairman of the Glasgow central strike committee, said the possibility of the TUC calling off the strike never crossed his mind. The CPGB was feeding off illusions and feeding illusions in their demands on the TUC: a historic lesson for today.

The background to the general strike was the consolidation and growth of the trade union bureaucracy or officialdom during the collaboration with the employers and the state during the First World War and after as unions amalgamated from above in response to the industrial unionism from below. Growing unemployment and an employers'

offensive which inflicted serious defeats on the organised workers, such as the engineers' lock-out in 1922, weakened grass roots trade union activists and organisation in the workplace. The TUC's voluntary surrender in 1926 served to strengthen officials' hold on the trade unions.

Recently, following the defeat of the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-5 in which NUM leader Arthur Scargill pleaded in vain for effective solidarity from the TUC rather than appeal to the rank and file over the heads of their leaders, officialdom has once again generally kept a tight grip on the trade unions and workplace organisation has been weakened.

But it has been argued within The Commune that the tactic of placing demands on the TUC to lead the class struggle is still applicable since the TUC endorsed a one day general strike in 1972 following the imprisonment of five dockworkers who led unofficial and illegal strike action against the wishes of their union leader, Jack Jones of the TGWU. But there was already a strike of national proportions: the dockers simply walked out on strike and demonstrated outside Pentonville prison. They directly called on other workers to take solidarity action. Fleet Street printers, airport workers, London bus workers, Sheffield engineers and many other organised sections where grassroots organisation was strong came out, completely bypassing the TUC and not waiting for top officials to approve the action through procedure. This sparked panic: the balance of class forces was unfavourable to an unprepared government. To try to tame the movement the TUC endorsed a one-day strike call. It did not lead the victorious mass struggle, which took place independently.

Bureaucracy embodies the function of trade unions as organisations which negotiate the terms of workers' exploitation: tied to the wages system. The rationale of trade union officials is to improve workers' conditions within capitalism, but only when that is possible and affordable and only if the movement is kept within safe channels. Trade unions in themselves cannot be vehicles for transcending capitalism. They do have a predetermined objective form, as sellers of a commodity – labour power. As Marx wrote "The value of labour power constitutes the conscious and explicit foundation of trade unions".

But the grassroots or rank and file trade unionists in the workplace face the direct effects of capitalism and in that sense Marx called trade unions the schools of socialism, the elementary combination of workers as a barrier against the intrusions of capital. That is why The Commune stands with the postal worker facing longer hours, more work or the loss of his/her job, rather than the CWU Executive.

british airways court ruling flies in the face of democracy

★ In December the vast majority of British Airways staff voted to take strike action, planning twelve consecutive days of walkouts against massive attacks on pay and job posts. But a court ruling stopped the workers going through with the action they had voted for.

by Gregor Gall

professor of Industrial Relations, Hertfordshire University

The High Court decision to grant British Airways an injunction against the Unite union's 12-day strike, was as Unite said, "a disgraceful day for democracy". The will of 92.5% on an 80% turnout of 12,000 workers was struck down in a single moment by a solitary judge.

Applications for – and threats of – injunctions are made on the basis of the onerous laws governing industrial action ballots. This means there are statutory obligations to provide employers with notices of a) balloting, b) who is to be balloted, c) ballot results, d) the action and e) those taking action.

If unions do not stand down from their proposed actions once injunctions are granted, they are in contempt of court, and thus open to fines and sequestration of assets.

The law's employer-favouritism is revealed by employers being given the opportunity to do all they can to offset the impact of an action by taking remedial measures because of the requirement to give seven days' notice of action.

Moreover, as injunctions are only temporary orders indicating that the employer had an arguable case, the parties are supposed to come back for a full hearing revisited by a full hearing later on. Of course, they almost never do so, as the employer already has what it wanted – an end to the proposed action or action itself.

On top of this, the law is so complex and demanding that the ground for applying for injunctions is vast. Normally, as in the BA case, it concerns the nature of the ballot and the balloting process.



media attacks on BA staff such as this cartoon in The Times paved the way for a court ruling to block the strike

The recent injunction granted to BA makes all this even worse, because the judge set two new legal precedents.

First, by taking into account the level of disruption ensuing from the action as a factor in her decision. This has no basis in existing law and the logic here is that only those strikes that are ineffective will be allowed to go ahead. This will be of particular concern to Aslef, CWU, RMT and Unite because their members have the power to take action that has an immediate impact and the services affected are not readily replaced by others.

Second, the technical competence of balloting is now based on whether all those that voted for action are the same as all those that take action. The judge agreed with BA on the significance of the 800-900 staff that were balloted but were then leaving the company. This could mean that if there is any movement in numbers between those balloted and those taking action – induced deliberately by an employer or not – a strike ballot can be declared unlawful.

With a likely Tory government in a few months time, the screw is going to be turned even tighter on workers and their unions here. If elected, the Tories will legislate so that lawful ballots for industrial action comprise only those where the majority of all those entitled vote voted for action. This means those that do not vote will be counted as no votes. They will look at legislating a ban on strikes what they deem are 'essential services'.

With little hope for the return of a Labour government, and none of a Labour government prepared to repeal the anti-union laws, unions must now start thinking of strategies to defy and get round the law.

The obvious parallels are the 1970s and 1980s. In the early 1970s, the Industrial Relations Act 1971 was made a dead letter through mass defiance and huge political campaigns. When Labour returned to office in 1974, it repealed the Act. This was made possible by a self-confident and assertive working class.

By contrast, the language of an attack on workers and democracy was the same in the 1980s but the collective action was not. In the first Tory government of 1979-1983, the talk was of mass civil disobedience and widespread industrial action to repeal the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts.

But the huffing and puffing came to nothing as the defeat of Labour in 1983 saw the birth of 'new realism' – essentially do not rock the boat in order to help Labour get re-elected. With a new Labour leadership under Kinnock and Hattersley, the miners and printers did not receive full and unequivocal backing when they fought back. They were defeated as they fought on their own, hemmed in and shackled by anti-union law.

It's too much of a task to click one's finger and recreate the early 1970s today. But drawing the lessons and disseminating them is the first step to try to do so.

an alternative view of the classroom

by a primary school teacher in Tower Hamlets

When I was at school I worked hard, did what I was told and got good results. When I was at university I hoped an undergraduate degree in education would shed some light on the true potential education has to make a better world. I studied philosophy and sociology of education at a university for whom the faculty of education, its roots in vocational training, was a slightly embarrassing poor relation, best kept at arms length and occasionally derided. The message was sometimes enlightening, the medium certainly was not. I embarked on a PGCE at the Institute of Education where I lost all hope that our education system held any radical elements that might actually cut through the elitist bureaucracy of government policy; clearly it was up to the individual to find the tiny cracks around the edges of the system wherever they could and fill them with something that felt more like being alive than a standards-driven agenda of mind-reducing mundanity. The real tragedy being that the vast majority of people didn't seem to realise that there was any need to look for the cracks, let alone feel able to start to think what mind-expanding possibilities you might be able to fill them with.

And then I found a place that was one big crack, through which sun-light streamed. A place that had been built on the solid principles of child-centred, class conscious principles, and by in large stuck to them in both its theory and practice. The place isn't perfect, but is a place with more integrity than any other educational institution I've been involved with. So here are a few things that our ordinary state funded community primary school is and does that shows us that you can.

The starting point for our inner-city primary school serving a diverse and economically deprived community is that everyone is welcome. We turn no one away, and have a policy of never excluding anyone. In practice this means that we welcome the children that other schools find ways of excluding. We have a high number of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and the challenge of meeting the needs of these children is at the core of what we do. We pride ourselves on being a truly inclusive school, which means no covert selection, no exclusion and no setting or streaming. At the heart of our school is the belief that people behave in ways for reasons, everyone is good and we need to try and understand what the message is in the be-



the classroom doesn't have to be soulless

haviour of children – even if it's extremely challenging. To this end there is a no shouting policy, problems are discussed with children, sometimes over and over again. Boundaries are firm but fair, and never delivered with anger or aggression. There is no school uniform, and all the staff are known to the children by their first names which encourages a sense of mutual respect and humanity. Staff often talk about their feelings, we're not merely professionals but people too; we ask children to respect our feelings as we respect theirs, and we try to help children recognise that different people need different things, and everyone needs compassion.

Classrooms are all unique, safe interesting places that reflect the diversity of our community. School policy states that the physical environment of the school should reflect our equalities policy, thus you'll see positive messages about being gay, black female, or disabled throughout the school. Each room has a cosy book corner and a special table which is home to precious objects and things of sentimental value. There is no fixed seating in any class; the tables are arranged to allow children to sit individually, in pairs, threes, fours, fives or sixes as they wish or sometimes as is needed.

The vast majority of teaching is collaborative and mixed ability therefore from a very young age children learn to respect each others differences in learning styles and pace, and learn to support one another. This is a direct contrast with the practice of the national literacy and numeracy strategy which focuses heavily on differentiated group teaching, splitting children up sometimes across year groups for isolated sessions. We don't do the literacy or numeracy hour, rather we try and embed literacy and numeracy skills throughout our planning, and try and set up situations in which children can explore ideas and apply the 'tools' or skills their learning to something meaningful. We trying to get away from dividing knowledge into subjects; instead we take an interesting theme as a focal point for all our work across the disciplines. This term in year six we've so far focused on evolution, revolution and now migration as the themes for our learning. Each time we endeavour to make the children's own experiences and passions our starting point for planning, and then look outwards into the big world they're living in and bring aspects of that world they might not have come into contact with yet into our classroom. In this way ideas are linked, not only to each other, but to the people who are thinking about them, and this develops a tapestry of learning that centrally is about perspectives and relationships.

There are other things that I like about our school: we don't teach to the test, we recognise that SATs aren't measuring what we value as real education and therefore don't mind if we don't do very well in them – or at least I don't, and as a teacher I'm allowed that autonomy by management. Every child learns to swim, and to play the violin. *Every child learns to play the violin* – this is no mean feat, and was the initiative of a previous head teacher who thought all children should have the opportunities middle class children have, so made it possible. We have a school council who are integral to the hiring of staff amongst other things – and class representatives are not only democratically elected but, as one humbled member of my class found out, also recallable if they lose the trust and respect of their peers.

There are of course still ways in which we're trapped by the system. But generally I come home feeling as if I've been able to do my job with some integrity and I hear children believing in themselves and what they're doing. In essence, I now firmly believe where there's a will, there are ways; the question is, where's the will?

why such scope for union-busting in schools?

by Florence Mensah

There are a number of reasons why I have found it difficult to write about union-busting politics in my workplace. (i) I have been working too hard to consider that I might take time to reflect on it all. (ii) I, like many other workers, am intimidated by the threat of losing my job. (iii) It is sometimes hard to know what good will come from having a great big moan, and it can make you feel even worse!

However, I was encouraged to write about what has been going on in my school by a fellow comrade. Why? Because we are a community of workers, whatever our jobs, whatever our unions. Unless we can problematize the very insidious tactics that managements put in place daily to undermine our agency and threaten our security and mental well-being, we will not be confident in recognising how best to tackle them.

Some context: the secondary school where I work as a teacher was near special measures five years ago. There were stabbings on-site. The school community had to deal with all the stigma and difficulty that goes along with the devastating gang scene. As a result it was subject to a 'make-over challenge' consisting in massive scrutiny from OFSTED (and numerous outsourced education and management consultancy firms). It was turned around by a leader who effectively culled ineffective staff. Like many schools in this situation the aim became to bring in a new 'calibre of child' in order to produce precious data that is rarely yielded by a cohort of entirely working-class children. In my opinion, therefore, the school is already resting on politically (and morally) dubious grounds; more concerned with raising the class- status of the school than thinking of ways to serve the children who are most in need of a transformative education.

Staff are now expected to collaborate in producing a mirage of excellence and professionalism. However chaotic the systems that have been put in place we cannot 'be seen' to be disagreeing with any figure in our heavy web of a management structure. At least once a fortnight some staff will



management want the classroom to be a tightly controlled environment

be called into an impromptu meeting to be spoken at for two hours. Questions will not be directly answered. We will be patronised; told off for duties that we could potentially be neglecting - duties which we will then have to perform outside of our directed hours.

The school operates a 'name and shame' system in which names of late and absent staff are published in a weekly bulletin. Similar postings are made for incomplete registers.

What is the logic of this management style? I guess it is thought that people respond well to fear. That people feel like they have no room to make mistakes and therefore strive for perfection. Unfortunately it does seem to have this effect on many people. Despite many issues being taken up by our busy union reps, there remains a resounding echo of 'you just have to play the game- don't rock the boat.' What makes it harder to mobilise against management tactics is that there exists a super-layered management structure. Half of the work-force have been branded 'middle-managers'. This is inevitably reflected in their pay-packet.

There are few who are willing to jeopardise pay - why should they be?

So promotions and threats divide the workforce, just like any other workplace. What is unique to the secondary school as a workplace is that there is a common misconception that any attention that is paid to workers rights and entitlements has a detrimental effect on students. Teachers who are trade unionists are caricatured as whiners more concerned with coasting through the day than engaging wholly in the delivery of their students' education.

It is this myth that I feel it is important to debunk. Public sector workers are easily exploitable *because* they care about the people they are actually working for; in my case the students. It is my right to do my job well because I enjoy the success and the buzz of knowing that children in my class have learnt something.

In order to do my job well I need to lead a balanced life which requires me to hold on to time that is truly my own. In order to do my job well I would like to work as a part of a collaborative team, not one that is divided and competitive. Lastly, and most importantly, I and every other education worker needs to be able to work without the intense level of scrutiny to which we are subjected. Headteachers become paranoid because of the top-down centralised structures of OFSTED and target-projections. What this means is that, in extreme cases like my own, teachers are battered with mantra relating to quantifiable outcomes - so battered they are often left without space to contemplate how best to create meaningful learning experiences.

I believe that the mistreatment of workers correlates with a mistreatment or neglect of students. What we are seeing is that education is beginning to cater for students on only superficial level (for profit if you like) whilst staff are made to feel as if they are disposable. We should refuse to entertain these union-busting tactics. We have a duty to ourselves, and as role models to our students, to protect our rights and to prevent ego-maniac management dictating the future of education.

correspondence and debate



time to vote labour?

by Bill Butlin

The impending public expenditure cuts look like being a key issue for trade unionists at the next general election. The Labour Party and the Tories both maintain that cuts are unavoidable and that no alternative exists to their implementation.

In an interview with Andrew Marr at the beginning of January the Tory leader was gung ho on this issue. He maintained that the cuts identified as necessary by New Labour were not stringent enough. Clearly any pretence by Cameron that he represents the acceptable One Nation face of the Conservative Party, and one that has left Thatcherism behind, is challenged by this professed policy objective. An objective that will not only see public expenditure cuts but further privatisations and a parallel attack on public sector trade unionism.

This attack on trade unionism could well see further attacks on the right to strike in the public sector and an attempt to break the strength of workplace trade unionism. The public sector remains a bastion of shop steward resistance. The attempt to attack terms and conditions in this sector will see the annual pay rise either diminished or becoming a relic of the past as the Tories attempt to cut the cost of labour power in this sector.

In the face of this Tory attack the clear lead from socialists is that workers need to rely on your own strength to beat back this attack. And that we need to organise sooner rather than later in order to do this

However there remains the difficult question of how socialists should vote in the next general election. The two traditional responses to this by the left both seem inadequate.

The first of these is the ultra left view, long held by the more exotic sects in the labour movement, maintaining that there is no difference between the Labour and Tory party and that workers should support neither one at election time. The other advises a Labour vote on the grounds that the Labour Party may be bastards, but at least they are 'our bastards' and part of the workers' movement.

Both of these arguments seem to me to ignore the important changes that have taken place in the Labour Party in recent years. These have moved it further to the right and have arguably made it no longer a traditional social democratic party. The abandonment of Clause Four and the retention of the Tory anti union laws, which are now New Labour anti union laws, are obvious examples of the way neo-liberal ideology has infected this party.

In the face of this, how can we explain the fact that some extremely class conscious workers will be calling for a Labour vote at the next election? Part of this has to be that they realise the extent of the attacks the Tories will be planning after the next election. Another reason is that hatred of the Tories remains strong in the workers' movement. Another is the belief that the workers' movement has more influence with a Labour government.

These however are not the only reasons. The call for a Labour vote also represents an implied criticism of the sectarianism of the so called 'revolutionary' left and its failure to build any political alternative to New Labour.

The Commune should listen very carefully to what this layer of workers is saying and give them a platform in our paper and forums. We should do this on the clear understanding that the answer to the current attack on the public sector remains in the hands of the working class itself and not the Labour Party. This understanding needs to point to the other side of the debate as well: that is, to the complete political bankruptcy of neo-liberal New Labour and the attack on public expenditure that both Brown and Darling are now planning.

iww facing the crisis: syndicalism resurgent

by David Bailey

West Midlands Branch, IWW

When many people hear of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) they might think of historical events, such as its founding in 1905, the successful recruiting and militant strike-waves it organized in the US in the first two decades of the twentieth century, or the ruthless repression it experienced from the US Government during and shortly after the first world war. However, the IWW's model of industrial unionism has also been experiencing a major resurgence in the UK over the past decade, which puts it in an ideal position to respond to the current crisis. In particular, the IWW's lack of a union leadership to stifle its membership's militancy means it is able to avoid the kind of situation seen in the recent postal workers' dispute, where union leaders adopt a less militant line than that of their membership.

Whilst the IWW has for many years been viewed as a nice idea, but of little practical impact, its ability to actively affect workplace struggles has become increasingly apparent in recent years. In the UK, members have begun identifying new ways to agitate for a more militant approach to

class struggle. Most members also join the TUC-affiliated trade unions within their workplace. This allows them to adopt a 'dual-carding' strategy, where they can both agitate within the mainstream trade unions, and present an alternative, more radical, approach to workplace organizing when they hit the inevitable limits experienced within those unions. Recent examples include the successful campaign to keep the Crichton campus of the University of Glasgow open, and the national campaign to oppose major cutbacks, plant closures, and restructuring in the National Blood Service. This dual-card strategy is becoming increasingly central to the IWW in Britain, with a national conference on the approach held recently. This conference also saw the creation of initial links with the National Shop Stewards Network.

The IWW is also undergoing important structural changes. A recent international ballot approved moves towards the creation of a European administration. This reflects the move away from its US-centred history, and will also ensure that the union remains accountable to its members in the regions in which it organizes. This is in part a result of its growing membership outside of the United States, with the UK membership more than doubling in the past three years, to around 600 members. The IWW's brand of militant, member-led, unionism is therefore clearly becoming an important and effective response by workers to capitalism's current crisis.

★ Further details: www.iww.org.uk

republican socialist convention

by Steve Freeman

On Saturday 13 February the International Committee of the Scottish Socialist Party, the Socialist Alliance, the Labour Representation Committee and the Green Left are sponsoring the Republican Socialist Convention. It will be held at London South Bank University. Invited speakers include John McDonnell MP, Bob Crow (RMT), Joseph Healey (Green Left), and Colin Fox (SSP).

The Convention has two clear aims. First it is to promote greater understanding of the struggle for radical democratic and republican practice as part of the struggle for socialism. Second is to promote greater awareness of the national dimension in the politics of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. However the Convention does not take place in a vacuum. Politics is gearing up for a general election.

In 2009 four major issues grabbed people's attention. First was the economic crisis. The failure of the banks and the nationalisation of their bad debts has virtually bankrupted the State. Second corruption in the Westminster parliament was exposed by the MPs expenses scandal. Third the Afghan war, the mounting toll of dead and wounded and a rising tide of British militarism and patriotism seeping deeper into national psychology. Last but not least is the issue of climate change highlighted by the UN conference in Copenhagen in December.

These issues are likely to figure prominently in the general election. Republican Socialist Convention is not attempting to discuss all this. But it does connect to one issue - the crisis of parliamentary democracy. The 'old corruption' is not confined to MPs expenses or the corridors and bars at Westminster. It lives through the laws, taxes and spending decisions that affect the living and working conditions of the working class. The failure of the Westminster brand of parliamentary democracy can be seen by walking around the streets and housing estates in any of our inner cities.

Of course this is a London or England centred view. It looks different in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Here parliaments and assemblies raise different democratic issues about power or sovereignty. After 1997 the Scottish parliament and Welsh Assembly has made some change. The republican movement in Northern Ireland came to a deal with the Crown. But the future of these institutional arrangements is far from settled. The present SNP government in Edinburgh for example is planning an independence referendum. The national question is far from resolved.

What should socialists say and do about the crisis of democracy? The record is not good. There has been a tendency, especially in England, to ignore constitutional issues and hope they will go away. We are followers of the



2009 saw a crisis for britain's parliamentary establishment

popular mood, not leaders of public (mainly working class) opinion. Lenin would surely have criticised us for "economism", the "worship of spontaneity" and "tailism".

The Republican Socialist Convention is not a sectarian initiative setting itself up against the rest of the left by offering the 'correct' view. Of course it stands for republicanism and socialism. But the aim is to promote dialogue across different strands, 'warts and all', that make up the working class movement. If there is criticism it is because we don't have all strands of opinion on the platform. However it is an invitation for all to contribute and hopefully gain a greater understanding from each other of the importance of democracy in the struggle for socialism.

The first Republican Socialist Convention was held in Edinburgh in 2008. The second in London reflects the problems, divisions and issues of the socialist movement here. However we have Scottish voices on the platform with invites to Welsh and Irish comrades. With the mass struggle for a secular republic in Iran we have invited a speaker from 'Hands of the People of Iran'. In England socialists have been active in the Labour Party (LRC), the Green Party (Green Left) and in independent organisations such as Respect and the No2EU coalition with the RMT. We hope to hear from all these voices either from the platform or from the floor.

With the general election coming up the Convention will therefore provide a platform for those who want to fight the Tories, New Labour and the Liberal Democrats. But our eyes must be firmly on using the election to prepare for the struggles that will arise afterwards. It means defending pay, jobs and public services by militant action. By raising the struggle for republican and socialist demands we challenge the rights of parliament and property to rule over us. The more workers reject their system of Westminster 'democracy' and corporate capitalism and demand alternatives the greater will be the resistance to the new capitalist government. The agenda of the Convention flows from these issues.

★ To contribute a short piece for the letters page in our next issue, email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

a new decade... the task: to build from below

by Dave Spencer

The most striking feature of British politics over the last decade has to be the disenfranchisement of the working class. The working class has little or no voice at national, regional or local level. Our task is to be part of the reversal of this situation. But this reversal has to come from below, from the linking and networking of the campaigns and struggles of the working class itself.

Unfortunately the organised left does not see it this way. As convinced vanguardists and elitists they see themselves as providing the leadership with all the answers that the workers must follow. They have had a decade in which to show leadership, but have failed dismally to build a broad united movement to fill the vacuum to the left of New Labour.

It is not as though material conditions have been unfavourable, given the biggest economic crisis for over 100 years; global warming which threatens the very existence of the planet; two unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and MPs and bankers being shown to be on the take.

But there have been attempts to build an organisation.

In 1996 we had the birth of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Socialist Alliance (SA) – all before the 1997 General Election which New Labour was expected to win. The SLP started well with a mass meeting of over a thousand in Camden Town Hall. Arthur Scargill addressed meetings of 300 to 400 in the large cities. In the 1997 general election the SLP stood 64 candidates and got just under 2% of the vote. The SSP stood 18 candidates and gained about the same percentage. The Socialist Party threw its weight behind the Socialist Alliance, mainly to form an alternative to the SLP which they saw as a serious rival.

Clearly there was potential in these attempts, given that workers were voting New Labour to get the Tories out and nobody knew quite what a rat Blair was to become. Given 14 years to the general election of 2010 surely some solid progress should have been made. What happened? Scargill insisted that joining the SLP meant you left every other organisation. There was no scope for factions in the SLP. Worse still Scargill's bureaucratic approach was demonstrated at the post-election SLP Conference when it came to light that a Mr Hardman was sitting in the conference with 3,000 votes – more than the rest of the delegates put together and using those votes to get through Scargill's policies and also to get Scargill's men on to the National Committee. People seized the microphone, led by comrades



reliance on 'celebrity' leaders damaged the left

from Cardiff who had achieved the best SLP vote in the election. "Why bother to have a secret ballot?" they demanded. "Why not ask Mr Hardman which policies he supports and be done with it? In fact why bother to have a Conference at all?" Over half the Conference walked out.

The SSP also made a good start and drew in a wide variety of enthusiastic members. In contrast to the SLP they quite rightly allowed minority factions. Both the SP and SWP joined as "platforms" of the SSP. However when Tommy Sheridan dragged the party into the courts, both the SP and SWP supported him and undoubtedly advised him to split the SSP. In my view this was no matter of principle, but a cynical manoeuvre on their part to wreck the SSP, which they saw as a rival. Left groups cannot stand competition.

The same political approach of narrow sectarianism based on an elitist vanguardist view of the party was used by both the SP and SWP in the Socialist Alliance. At the general election of 2001 the SA fielded 98 candidates and the SSP 72 candidates. This was ambitious but shows the potential to build a broad movement. The SP insisted on a federal structure for the SA which meant that decisions were taken by contacting the National Committees of the various left groups involved and individual SA members had no say. The SP left in a huff when the SA decided against federalism; they refused to stay in and fight their corner. That left the SWP in charge. In February 2005 the SWP closed down the SA in order to concentrate on Respect. What a depressing sight to see SWP members, sheep-like, queuing up to join the SA at the conference, only to use their new membership cards to close down the SA which some of us had been members of for 13 years!

What can we learn from this pitiful history? The first thing is that back-room deals by "leaderships" are not the way forward. There has to be democracy and accountability and

nothing less. And the working class must be involved. And we have to have a healthy distrust of left groups. Some SSP members now argue that they should never have let the SWP and SP join as platforms. I think they are right. They had no intention of building a broad movement in which they could play an important role. They were there to sell their papers and recruit anybody new to their own organisations. Any dealings with any British left group must now contain the health warning "Watch your back!"

This week in a large local residents' meeting where I live, called to protest about cuts in bus routes, one resident stated, "The cuts are going to get worse. After the election there's going to be a slaughterhouse!" Nobody disagreed. Every day in our local paper there are photographs of groups of people protesting about something. This is a new phenomenon brought about by the economic crisis. Some means of linking these struggles and grassroots organising must be found as a matter of urgency at local and national level. Some of these links already exist.

As Chair of the residents' group mentioned above I have had to learn very quickly about the transport system and how it works in order to propose our petition of protest to the Council. A few months ago we had a protest petition about a proposed PFI waste incinerator in our area. We had to find out about that. To learn about the workings of local government and their various operations is an eye-opener, believe me. All this information needs to be shared and we need to build up expertise on specific subjects like health, education, climate change etc.

In the course of defending public services and jobs we should start debates within the campaigns on how these services should properly be run with the workers concerned and with the public. How would it be under communism?

The questions of democratic workers' control and self-management and accountability should be raised. After all some members of the public will argue that some public services are crap – which they are. Nationalisation is not the complete answer – we need democratic control and accountability by workers and the public. Informed debates within protest campaigns has to be one method of building from below. It is a question of dialogue with the people involved, not of preaching from the rostrum.

The last decade saw the working class sidelined. Those claiming to stand for workers' rights failed because they started by insisting that they knew the answers and the workers had to follow. The new decade must be one of focussing on building communism from below.

cracks in the electoral tactics of france's anti-capitalist party

by Ramate Keita

from Paris

March will see regional elections in France. These will elect regional assemblies which control the budgets for transport, education and welfare. In the 2004 regional elections the Parti Socialiste won Paris and the majority of regions. At that time there was an alliance of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Lutte Ouvrière which secured one million votes: a pole for independent working-class politics.

Now, in the middle of a capitalist crisis, when the traditional bourgeois parties are losing ever more legitimacy, when workers are fighting back and the vanguard of workers and students is seeking to bring together these struggles, many Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste leaders believe that nothing can be done except look for allies to their right. They say that they cannot make calls to action without the social democrats and what remains of the Parti Communiste.

They have spent the year trying to form an electoral front for the coming regional elections, following the model of Die Linke in Germany, a "left" social democratic party which drags a few Trotskyist groups along behind it.

To do this they have sought unity with the Parti de Gauche and other social democratic groups like Les Alternatives and the Parti Communiste. This unity broke down because there were no guarantees that in the end it would not lead to a deal with the Parti Socialiste – most likely in the second round of voting – to which the NPA leadership is opposed.

When the holidays ended in August, political activity also restarted. But the preoccupation of the national leadership was not intervention in the fight against the privatisation of post, nor the fight against redundancies and defending jobs.

The activity of the whole party was hanging on the discussions with these groups to the "left" of the Parti Socialiste. The leadership's priority was not response to the numerous struggles, nor the drift of many activists away from the party, nor improving the party newspaper.

The NPA leadership also made concessions to these groups in search of unity: in the electoral programme, "a ban on redundancies" was replaced with "change, to put an end to unemployment and lay-offs"; in place of a "demand for 300 euros a month increase in all salaries and a minimum wage of 1500 euros a month", they accepted "defend purchasing power"; and also concessions on the retirement age, the expropriation of the banks, etc.

Electoral politics provoke a crisis in the party

In the national leadership's text to the party congress it comments that "four months of debate have not allowed us to reach a national agreement. The political conditions imposed by the Front de Gauche, in which the Parti Communiste played a decisive role, are incompatible with the orientation of the NPA. Their objective was to set up electoral lists clearly in the perspective of managing regional government together with the Parti Socialiste and Europe Ecologie [Greens]." Clear enough, anti-neo-liberalism and neo-liberalism cannot co-exist.

But the NPA posture as not to appear "against unity" now also accepts participation in regional government "if the Parti Socialiste is not in the majority" and can keep the door open to co-management of bourgeois institutions.

To put an end to the discussion on electoral "unity" the NPA organised a referendum where members could vote on three proposals.

★Platform A, the national leadership: there is no national agreement, but continue regional agreements.

★Platform B, to the left of the leadership: NPA lists independent of the social democrats and the Parti Communiste. A turn to workers' and students struggles.

★Platform C: alliance with social democrats at national level. This means unity with the Parti Socialiste and the neo-liberal greens of Europe Ecologie.

The result was the division of the party into three roughly equal parts, none of them securing a majority. The Central

Committee, however, voted 70% in favour of Platform A.

Many comrades are unhappy that this situation has arisen. They think it will be very difficult to obtain strong electoral support, in part because unity with Lutte Ouvrière has been ruled out. But the state of class struggle is changing, with a spreading transport strike and growing discontent.

Electoralism, struggle and union bureaucracy

The NPA press only dedicated a few lines to the formation, in November, of an opposition current in the CGT trade union federation, the "Committee for a class struggle CGT". At the meeting to establish this current, a few NPA activists were present, but the party leadership has not taken a clear position in support of the initiative.

This was no surprise given that in October a CGT delegation met with the NPA leadership. Getting on with the bureaucrats is a necessary condition of making electoral fronts with the political currents close to them. The NPA leaders assuaged the bureaucrats' concerns, saying they "have no intention of substituting for the unions", although any political organisation with a project has to give some opinion on demands to respond to bosses' and governmental attacks. But, for the sake of getting along with the sell-out CGT bureaucracy, they assured them that "the NPA makes clear to the CGT that its fear of an NPA current being established in the CGT has no founding. The autonomy of unions in their defence of workers is natural for the NPA", but a political organisation has every right to "pose the question" on its strategy for mobilising workers.

The NPA respects the "autonomy" of Thibault – the top bureaucrat of the CGT – to continue asphyxiating struggles and persecuting class struggle activists! They promise him that they will not lift a finger to initiate opposition currents. They will just sit cloud-gazing.

It is not by capitulating to Thibault, and refusing to pose class struggle opposition, that the NPA will show itself to be a clear alternative.

is a ‘workers’ government’ a capitalist government?

by David Broder

The recent history of struggle for communism, or even progressive social change, is not a happy one. While the last decade has seen struggles from which we can take some cause for inspiration, such as social movements in Latin America, general strikes in France and Greece and, even in Britain, the early days of the movement against the war in Iraq, our movement has struggled to offload the burden of the defeats it suffered in the 1980s. There is a crisis of confidence in the possibility of an alternative to capitalism, when every revolution of the last century was defeated.

Given this long-term picture of repeated defeats, it is remarkable how Britain’s socialist groups are fixated with the general election which will take place in a few months time: already we see the calls for ‘guarded’ and ‘critical’ support for the Labour Party, for fear of ‘letting in the Tories’. Just one year after the greatest capitalist crisis for eight decades, many revolutionary groups only ask themselves which party of capital is ‘least-worst’: the short-term tactical consideration comes to shape their whole perspectives.

But we will never be able to present an alternative pole of attraction, and make up for long-term historic defeats, if we allow the electoral calendar and the electoral prospects of right-wing social democrats to determine our short-term priorities. We should after all dispel, rather than propagate, mainstream politics’ understanding that you should vote for the least bad politician on offer (Labour’s main argument for the election...), based as it is on an assumption that working people cannot change anything ourselves.

Most on the radical left today would refuse any electoral support for a party like Barack Obama’s Democrats, even to keep out the Republicans, since both parties are plainly pro-business and pro-imperialist. Similarly, Trotskyists have long denounced the ‘Popular Front’ strategy adopted by the 1930s pro-Moscow Communist Parties whereby the communists would seek coalition governments with bourgeois liberals as well as social democrats. Both are examples of supporting one faction of the ruling class against another.

But this critique comes rather unstuck when we consider what happens if the bourgeois liberals are taken out of the picture: should the communists enter government with the social democrats? You might think not, reading such a document as the ‘Where we stand’ column which appears in each issue of *Socialist Worker*. This proclaims that “The structures of the parliament, army, police and judiciary cannot be taken over and used by the working people. Elections can be used to agitate for real improvements in people’s lives and to expose the system we live under, but only the mass action of workers themselves can change the system” – yet in *ISJ* the SWP theorist Alex Callinicos attacked France’s Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste for its insistence on the principle of not entering government with the neo-liberal social democrats of the Parti Socialiste...

Following a resolution passed by the 1921 Communist International Congress, Trotskyists believe a ‘United Front’ of parties with a working-class support base should seek to become a ‘workers’ government’: they counterpose this to the ‘cross-class’ Popular Front. In Britain this has often translated into revolutionaries calling for a Labour government with socialist policies. But the capitalist state is a social force in itself, not merely a matter of ministerial offices to be used as and how we please. Concretely speaking, the occupation of government positions by communists is in itself a Popular Front, since the executive arm of the so-called workers’ government is in fact the capitalist state bureaucracy and the two have to co-exist. Mere rejection of alliance with liberals is not ‘independent working class politics’ if the workers’ parties sit on top of the state machine, i.e., separate and apart from the working class.

Because it is they who fundamentally manage the state, it is up to the army, bureaucracy and courts and their backers to choose whether to allow the left to govern, or else get rid of them entirely.

In some cases, such as Spain in 1936 and Chile in 1973, the bourgeoisie has resolved this by abandoning its own state’s constitution, suspending the rules-of-the-game in order to overthrow the left government.

If the capitalist class do let the left occupy government, it is conditional on the left simply operating like any other government presiding over capitalism, imposing attacks on the working class and opposing movements from below. In this sense the left can even be useful for capitalism in containing and controlling movements from below and thus protecting the system: before Salvador Allende was overthrown by the army in Chile in 1973, he sent the army to poor districts to disarm the revolutionary workers. The only two choices for the communists involved in such an administration are to



prop up the social democrats in spite of their accommodation to capitalism – just the same as their relation to liberals in a Popular Front – or else to abandon government.

One among the original intentions of the United Front strategy is that we can expose the vacillation of the social democrats and their unwillingness to stand up to the bosses in the eyes of the working class. This might sound plausible: for example in a dispute led by reformist union leaders, communist workers might argue for some different strategy, which could win the support of those on strike such that they would then choose to follow a more militant course of action. They could go beyond the leadership’s approach.

But this is not possible when the United Front is a deal between sets of party leaders. Communist MPs could not take a similar oppositionist stance as members of a government, since any coalition is based on party leaders defending each other or else face the collapse of their alliance in government. The more direct analogy of the strike scenario described would be for the mass of workers to bypass this whole left government, taking power into their own hands rather than rely on leaders in parliament. Even to the extent that parliament offers a public platform to denounce the government, MPs who fulfil government functions would be alien to any such movement against that government.

“the occupation of government positions by communists is in itself a cross-class alliance, since the executive arm of government is the capitalist state bureaucracy and the two have to co-exist”

One recent example is Italy’s Rifondazione Comunista, who in 2006 as a young communist party with a vibrant internal life decided to enter coalition with the centre-left government of Romano Prodi. His Democratici di Sinistra had much working-class support and roots in the CGIL union federation, but needed Rifondazione’s support to send troops to Afghanistan and Lebanon. For fear of prompting the collapse of the government and letting Silvio Berlusconi into power, the party loyally backed Prodi, and expelled those members who defiantly voted against the war. Just three years later, Berlusconi is on the offensive in power, the Italian troops are still in Afghanistan, and Rifondazione has lost all 41 of its MPs. Even where it is true that the right wing will attack workers more harshly than the social democrats, the loss of independence involved in support for the latter is an unacceptable price to pay for stopping the first problem in the short term. The opposition to Berlusconi today is weaker than it would have been had Rifondazione not been so desperate to keep him out of government in 2006, because they abandoned their consistent, clear advocacy of a communist alternative to all such governments.

Of course, Trotskyist supporters of the workers’ government approach would denounce Rifondazione’s behaviour here, and would likely point to various contingent problems with such parties: for example, a lack of internal democracy, or lack of base in real grassroots struggle, such as could hold the leaders to account. Indeed, they are right to say that agitation against the war, breaking the coalition and dumping Prodi out of government would clearly have been the only principled thing to do. But it would also have shown up the fundamental inoperability of the coalition strategy and contradicted the much-vaunted need to do everything to keep out Berlusconi.

The episode unravelled as it did not due to some malign intention on the part of Rifondazione, but rather as the natu-

ral logic of the strategy itself. The same could also be said of Die Linke in Germany, who in regional coalition government with the Social Democrats (SPD) opposed the Berlin transport strike. Much as Die Linke (and, for that matter, the SPD) protest that they would not enter coalition at national level, the principle is little different, and it is alarming to now hear that the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, founded on rejection of the Communist Party’s idea of a ‘plural left’ government, would now consider regional coalition governments. In all these cases, it is accepting the idea that entering government is even a possible tactical choice which governs their drift towards seeing electoral politics as their central field of activity, and thus the reformist agenda they advocate. What kind of ‘anti-capitalist’ party could fathom participation in administering... capitalism?

In 2008 Alan Woods, a member of *Socialist Appeal*, published a book *Reform or Revolution?* arguing that the Hugo Chávez government in Venezuela is carrying out a socialist revolution because he is aware that reformism, leaving capitalism essentially intact, would give the bourgeoisie space to organise a coup against him. The most obvious reaction to this would be to object that Chávez clearly is a reformist, since for over ten years he has been enacting a long series of nationalisations and progressive parliamentary bills and Venezuela is still capitalist. He wants to carry out his revolution ‘by a thousand pricks’ against the bourgeoisie. But there is more to it than that. Reformism is not counterposed to revolution merely because it seeks gradual rather than ‘big bang’ social change: rather, because its means of organising are a reflection of existing social relations. Chávez enacts reforms and then the people choose whether to approve the course of action he has decided: however ‘progressive’ his bills or however ‘socialist’ his rhetoric, the working-class do not rule themselves.

Any party presiding over the state as *such* creates a hierarchical division of labour between experts and specialists who administer the system, and then a party membership who are there to support the decisions made by their leaders. This is because the very existence of the state represents the delegation of power by the mass of society – from the communities we live in and workplaces we work in – to some central body which holds power and sets its own rules. Even democratic controls over leaders or votes at conferences cannot overcome this separation – the question of who initiates policy; negotiations with other parties; budgeting for the state bureaucracy, army, courts and so on; cannot but be the decision of the few and is directly counterposed to the principles of the type of mass, collective action which imposes retreats on the part of the capitalist class, rather than just asking them to rule us nicely.

But this is not at all an argument for rejection of piecemeal changes to the benefit of the working class – here we simply pose the opposition between ‘negative’ demands pushing back the frontier of capitalist control; and a benign caste of leaders making change on our behalf. After all, this same problem of reformism is also apparent in the politics of the Socialist Party of Great Britain – ‘impossibilists’ who reject single issue campaigns and trade unionism on the grounds that these only seek to make capitalism more tolerable, not to overthrow it. These great opponents of reformism, who declare that the current system cannot be patched up, describe thusly their idea of the transition to socialism, “Once the vast majority makes the decision in favour of socialism, then it will elect socialist representatives or delegates to prove its majority, and to serve as a temporary focal point to administer the elimination of capitalism and the creation of socialism. But it won’t be, and could not be, the elected representatives or delegates who create socialism, it will be the people of the world as a whole.” Their conception of revolution is one whereby socialist representatives secure a parliamentary majority, take charge of the state then enact socialism. ‘Partial’ and ‘limited’ trade union type struggles and campaigns, even if they do not explicitly aim at uprooting capitalism as such, are still preferable to this idea of social change insofar as they promote working-class people’s sense of self-reliance and confidence in our ability to force change by our own collective power.

Left governments not only leave capitalism intact but also reflect its division of order-givers and order-takers; whereas all movements from below based on collective decision making challenge the hierarchical systems of organisation which characterise capitalist society. We cannot abstain from the struggle against the attacks planned by the incoming Tory government. We cannot passively wait for some ‘ripening of conditions’ for communist revolution. But it is collective action, not a benign government – particularly not a Labour one – which has the power to stop these attacks and advance the workers’ movement’s strength. Consciousness of the desirability and possibility of an a communist alternative will never come about through the politics of choosing the least-worst government for the capitalist state.

the commune’s december aggregate meeting

by Mark Ellingsen

The Commune held its quarterly national meeting on 12th December. The first item on the rather packed agenda was a discussion on the organisational principles of the network. The meeting re-affirmed the pluralist nature of the group. It was agreed that members should encourage diversity by embracing different ‘schools of thought’ that were compatible with our platform.

The Commune had members who were influenced by various Marxisms and non-Marxist thought, so it would be wrong to characterise The Commune as belonging to a specific tradition. Meaningful pluralism has been rare in the history of the communist movement which has too often been ridden by factionalism and fragmentation. Members are communists who recognise that communism is a movement from below and not a bureaucratic imposition on workers self-organisation. However, it was recognised that there was a need to clarify what communism meant as a specific form of society and that more theoretical analysis of this was required.

The second major item was a discussion of working class representation. There were a number of themes which came out of the discussion. First of all, recognition that the working class is no longer represented by an electoral party and that the trade unions have not been inclined to fill the gap left by New Labour. This lack of representation is all the more urgent given the attacks unleashed on the working class as part of both capital and the state’s response to the economic crisis. Secondly, all recent attempts to build a left reformist party through organisational co-operation have failed due to the manoeuvring of the traditional left organisations. However, it was also suggested that the failure of social democracy in both its right and left-wing variants has more to do with the changes in capitalism originating at least as far back as the 1970s. It may not be possible to reproduce the reformist social democracy of the post-war era. However, if the trade unions did move to build a challenge to New Labour then we would have to take a position on whether we ought to engage with it. Third, it was agreed that a hollowed out electoralism which was not based on struggles within communities and workplaces was to be avoided. Engaging in the process of struggle at the grassroots was more important than engaging in organisation manoeuvres with other left groups. Finally, it was suggested that we should not try to mimic old ideas of the party and we should be more flexible about organisational forms.

The discussion on the nature of trade unions centred on the questions published previously and on whether there ever had been a consistent Marxist analysis of trade unions. The debate was wide-ranging but there was no consensus as to the answers. On the one hand it could be argued that the historical reality of trade unions has been for the main part given over to negotiating the terms of labour with capital, at least once legal recognition was in place. On the other hand, the material expression of trade unionism depends on the economic, social, political and legal aspects of the

situation which can change, sometime quite rapidly, in either a positive or negative direction.

It was also suggested that it was important not to underestimate the role of ideas in the type of trade unionism that may be expressed. To some extent the discussion mirrored the debates within Marxism along a determinist-voluntarist axis with most adopting a position somewhere in between. It was also recognised that most workers are not in trade unions and it was suggested that the existence of trade unions blinds us to the possibility of other forms of organisation which may cut across the capitalist division of labour. There was some discussion of rank and file or grassroots solidarity and struggle and its relationship with the trade union leadership. The discussion was inconclusive except to confirm our commitment to the grassroots.

The final major topic of discussion was on the proposal to conduct a workers’ enquiry in London. The proposal was introduced as a means to connect with workers on a day-to-day level rather than the typical left engagement which tends to be limited to supporting strikes which, although important, does not engage with workers outside of major struggles. A workers’ enquiry can be used both as a means to understand the changing nature of work and a means of stimulating organisation and resistance to the imposition of detrimental working practices and managerial authority. More radically, it can also be used to question the nature of the work organisation and its goals. Furthermore, there is no reason to confine it the workplace but it can be used in localities, for example on council estates. However, it was suggested to start with something limited, for example, with a group of workers in a small workplace.

Responses to the proposal ranged from neutral to positive, with the major concern being to do with the resources required to conduct such an enquiry. There was some concern that workers’ enquiries conducted in the past had not adequately theorised the contradictions of capitalism and how this is expressed within the workplace and sometimes had not led to resistance but had remained as a sociological study. However, what everyone agreed with was the need to provide a forum for workers to discuss the situation in the workplace and this could also be provided through the paper and web site. It was agreed that the proposal should be made more concrete for further discussion. It was also mentioned that there was interest in this form of engagement in other parts of the country such as Bristol.

Finally, there was some discussion on the newspaper/web site. The main conclusions were that there needs to be more input from people on the content of the paper in a more collaborative manner and that their needs to be more content based on workers’ experiences as well as some form of letter page. With the web site, most agreed that it needs to be redesigned at some point because the blog format made it difficult to find previous articles. It was also mentioned that it was intended to produce an international journal in collaboration with other groups. The first issue is likely to be after the ‘Global Commune’ day school in Edinburgh on 16th January.

the commune’s activities

★London: The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital and are also running a series of reading groups on workplace organising this spring as well as our monthly forums.

Our next series of forums is on the themes of the general election, including meetings on the state of the labour movement; unemployment; the war in Afghanistan; proposed public sector cuts; and the question of whether we should vote. See website for details.

Join our email announcements list at <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommu-ne-london>. Phone David on 07595 245494 for more info

★Bristol: we are running a reading group series on “Alternatives to capitalism”. The first such meeting, on “Capital and capitalism”, will be held from 6pm on Sunday 24th January at Cafe Kino, Ninetree Hill, Bristol.

★South Yorkshire-based activists interested in The Commune should get in touch with Barry on 07543 652629

Our first reading group in Sheffield is on the subject “What would our alternative society look like?”. From 7pm on Tuesday 19th January at The Rutland Arms, 86 Brown Street, Sheffield S1 2BS.

★North-West: a reading group series will begin in February: contact Mark on 07976 386737

★West Midlands: If you are interested in a meeting on local organising or our group 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

★Our Facebook group is at <http://facebook.com/home.php?#/group.php?gid=100975860952>

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