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# the★commune

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## 'we are fighting for now and for our future'

As *The Commune* went to press the news media was dominated by coverage of the 6th May General Election.

Both in mainstream politics and among the left there is much discussion of the policies of Labour, the Tories and Lib Dems.

Yet in reality there is little choice in the election. Parliament does influence our lives, and yet barely half of registered voters will vote. There is widespread disillusionment but no alternative in the election.

We believe that workers' self-organisation is a far more important means of changing society. PCS, RMT and Unite members are all organising to stop the cuts planned by all three major parties.

One recent example of struggle was the international day of action against Swiss bank UBS, which via contractor Lancaster has imposed an effective 10.75% pay cut on its cleaners in the City of London and sacked shop steward Alberto Durango.

The protests were called in solidarity with the cleaners' demands for stable working conditions, the sacking of the contractor and the reinstatement of Alberto Durango. Demos were held in London, Zurich, Edinburgh, Manchester, New York, Buenos Aires and Stockholm.

Despite a lack of official backing from the Unite union, these migrant workers are standing up against the election consensus. Resisting the cuts agenda, attacks on immigrants and politicians' love-in with the banks, their struggles show a different idea of politics: resistance from below.

### Jerry Hicks

Candidate for Unite general secretary

We need solidarity and strength in numbers of trade unionists and non-trade unionists, of campaign groups, pensioners, workers and the unemployed, all those who will be facing the wrath of the cuts to come. The employers who mete out the cuts, victimisations, their fear and intimidation: this will be met by our wrath. Our wrath of solidarity.



*a lively evening-time demo in the city of london*

There are millions of us. In my union, 1.7 million trade unionists. If we all spat together we would drown UBS in the flood.

In weeks to come will be the General Election. Whichever party gets in they offer cuts: savage cuts, £75 billion worth of cuts, and the Tories promise to be the most unpopular government since the Second World War within 12 weeks of office. Not one of those parties would offer the repeal of anti-trade-union-laws or offer reinstatement for victimised workers.

### Steve Kelly

Unite construction branch

Unite construction workers support this campaign 100%. We recently wrote to Steve Hart, the union's regional secretary, who said these people demonstrating are anti-union. When we got this letter back: well, I've never heard so much rubbish in all my life.

Where is Steve Hart, where is Derek Simpson, where are the leaders of Unite? Not here, as usual: they never turn up on any demos, they leave us hanging out to dry. I'd appeal to you to write from your branches demanding that Steve Hart get behind Alberto and support his members in struggle.

Instead of swanning about talking with employers, how about coming out and supporting their members? That's the name of the game, that's what we're all here for.

We support you 100% Alberto, and you are more than welcome at our branch. The same for all cleaners, indeed, any worker in struggle. It doesn't matter what union you're in, as far as I'm concerned any union member deserves the backing of all unions.

Victory to Alberto, victory to the cleaners!

★26th March saw a similar protest at University College London, addressed by a worker victimised by contractor Office & General because of the cleaners' demand for a 'living wage'.

### Juan Carlos Piedra

victimised cleaner activist

Today is another day of struggle for workers' rights. Along with the demonstrations in solidarity with Alberto Durango, we want to tell the companies that we are not going to allow any more discrimination and victimisation against cleaner activists.

We are sure that the UCL students, unions, teachers and admin staff at UCL will back that call not to allow the violation of the rights of workers here on this campus. We are also part of the wider campaign against cuts in public spending: we are fighting for now and for our future.

### solidarity with the UBS cleaners!

The next London demonstration will take place from 5pm on Friday 23rd April outside UBS, 100 Liverpool Street.

A Cleaners' Defence Committee has been established to organise solidarity with cleaners in struggle. It has regular meetings in London.

See [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=321918197556](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=321918197556) or email [uncaptive-minds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptive-minds@gmail.com) for more details on getting involved.

## striking against labour's budget

★As Chancellor Alistair Darling delivered a pre-General Election Budget, striking civil servants set up pickets in Westminster to embarrass the Government.

### by Steve Ryan

Wrexham PCS

Despite the excellent support for the two day PCS strike on 8th-9th March, it seems the government are refusing to negotiate on the changes to the Civil Service Compensation Scheme.

The dispute is now crucial as it is clear that Labour are seeking to act tough and beat one of the most militant unions in the TUC. It is also emerging that the attack on terms and conditions is not just about slashing jobs put softening up for privatisation.

Comrades outside PCS should be urging maximum solidarity and where possible arguing for linked disputes. It is significant that this is at the same time as the British Airways strike and upcoming RMT dispute.

This looks like PCS is in for the long haul and must not be allowed to lose. To do this, however, as *The Commune* has consistently argued, will take more innovative tactics than one day strikes and the question of a levy is now urgent.

Ordinary members themselves are urging such tactics, and this is where the setting up of support groups and strike committees will play a crucial part in ensuring the action is controlled and built from below by rank and file activists.

It is now all too clear that workers are paying for the recession. The PCS fightback is to be applauded, but mass action will be needed as attacks grow, as they will over the coming months.

Communists should seize every opportunity to fight back and unite struggles, from strikes to resisting stock transfers (now spreading like wild fire in Wales), supporting migrant workers, resisting fascists and supporting environmental protests.

Uniting industrial and community actions, and diverse strands on the left, is the key to re-building a real workers movement, and hence massive resistance to capitalism in its time of crisis.



# recession and solidarity in france

by Ramate Keita

On 7th April workers at Continental tyres charged with damaging the police prefecture where they demonstrated last year appeared at a tribunal in Compiègne. Numerous activists and delegations joined them to bring solidarity.

Because of the rail strike, we arrived late at this solidarity demonstration.

The Continental workers explained that they were determined not to pay and that they refused to accept the state and the bosses forcing six of their comrades to pay a fortune on account of the workers' just struggle.



*sodimatex workers threatened to blow up their factory. unfortunately they too fell victim to worker militancy as a train strike delayed their progress to a solidarity demo*

Participants in a number of grassroots workplace struggles were present, having come to meet each other and offer mutual solidarity in their fights against lay-offs.

Comrades from various different factories and workplaces gave their views:

**Samperit**, which makes conveyor belts for mines: the workers explained that they were in the same union federation, for those working with chemicals and rubber, they had the same contract as the tyre workers and were in solidarity with Goodyear and Continental workers.

**Philips** workers argued that "we must have a common policy against factory closures". They are facing hard times, with their workplace due to shut down on 16th April.

**Goodyear** workers in Amiens faced similar problems, facing threats of cuts in personnel.

Municipal employees in the **Paris bins service**: they are defending their pensions, jobs and salary.

**Total** workers, whose national strike was abandoned by the CGT union bureaucrats, continue resisting with their occupation of Dunkirk refinery, which has now lasted three months: "defending the Continental workers as we would our own colleagues".

There were also workers from **Sodimatec**, who threatened to blow up their factory in early April: "Continental workers came to solidarise with us and now here we are for them".

They spoke of "joining up struggles", and not of a general strike: this, because they know that the bureaucrats of the union federations will prevent any unity in action.

We shouted slogans outside the tribunal. As might have been expected, we were attacked by police with irritant gas in aerosol cans, like mosquitoes!

Then finally the accused comrades emerged. The prefecture had demanded 53,000 euros but only got 1,200. They did not dare force the workers to pay more because they realised their determination and the solidarity they could count on.

They read out solidarity messages from as far away as Argentina. They have also received contributions from unions in various countries to pay the fine.

# anarcha-fems meet

by Bahar Mustafa

Manchester Anarcha-Feminists and the Anarchist Federation Women's Caucus collaborated on the weekend of 10th-11th April to present two days of workshops inclusive of all genders and ages. The event took place at the Manchester University Students' Union, and was a brilliantly organised gathering with a vibrant atmosphere. Activists, students, and parents came from all over the UK to be part of the experience.

However, within the feminist movement it is a saddening truth that there exists a division. Feminists on one side of this rupture offer rather contentious analysis in regards to such themes as pornography, prostitution and trans-gendered self-defined women; regarding any woman engaging in such acts as anti-feminist, and excluding trans-gendered self-defined women from the movement, on the basis that they do not share the same experiences. This is typical of reactionary and conservative responses to these questions - not to mention detrimental to the feminist movement and the struggle of all people.

The other side works to inform people that the conditions and experiences of prostitutes and sex-workers vary between individuals, and no woman (or man) should be condemned or criminalised for working the streets, but rather should be protected. They also recognise trans-gendered self-defined women and value their experiences, as well as providing assiduous gender analysis that is often neglected by those from the conservative position. Fortunately, this weekend was full of diverse workshops that provided a space for open-minded, progressive discourse.

Thus we had the opportunity to hear the experiences of two trans-gendered males who expressed their feelings of being de-humanised and ignored by a society which fails to recognise them as people because they do not fit in to the black and white (female and male) categories that are relentlessly imposed upon individuals.

I also attended a workshop entitled "Prostitution: Is it choice?" where some of the aforementioned divisions began to present themselves: however each of us were respectful of each other's opinions and we all felt safe and comfortable to speak freely. Analysis of the power dynamics between customer and prostitute were discussed, in relation



*the conference challenged binaries of gender and sexuality*

to the power structures within our current capitalist economic and social system – and how this could be challenged through direct action.

Other workshops included Women and Disability, Radical Childrearing, Women in Prisons and Squatters Workshops, among others, as well as poetry and performances. Free lunch was provided (which catered for vegetarians and vegans) and free crèche facilities were also available. However, it was brought to my attention that unfortunately people with disabilities seemed to have been overlooked as all the workshops took place on the second floor of the building, and there were no lifts. Hopefully in future events this would be taken into consideration.

Overall the experience was enlightening and beneficial for anyone committed to the movement, and people affected by the issues analysed in the workshops. Not only were there a myriad of thought-provoking and informative discussions, but we also came up with practical ideas for future enterprises that included how we could utilise direct action effectively. I left feeling positive and confident about my position in the Feminist Movement.

# royal mail deal: a post mortem

★After 18 days' strike action in London in 2009 the Communication Workers' Union leadership voted for a return to work. As one reader of *The Commune* explains, the subsequent outcome has demoralised many:

by 'Postman Pat'

I work at the West End Delivery Office in west London. After all the voluntary early retirements there's along the lines of 300 workers on the floor, of those just 40-50 on nights.

The nightshift is sorting-only but because of the cuts in recent years they hardly ever manage to finish the sorting of letters so that's usually left for the dayshift: so day staff do sorting and delivery. Some days my district doesn't manage to finish delivery on time because of a cut from 5 to 2 men on sorting, so we don't leave the office til 1pm.

Rumour has it that the head manager Dom wants to only have staff with driving licenses in the future. There are no clues what is going to happen to the rest of us. Moreover when machinery for sorting comes in the majority of night staff will be pushed onto dayshift and a large surplus of staff will develop. Both the union and management say there will be no compulsory redundancies: but... cynic as I am, I reckon that will just mean take part time work or else piss off.

Obviously we are affected by the new "deal" between CWU HQ and Royal Mail. The deal means that the whole of RM will have unlimited door-to-door junkmail for a fixed sum (maybe around £20 weekly). There is also talk of turning Saturday into a normal workday instead of short as at present.

People were well up for the strike in winter. We were pissed off with working conditions in general and there was lots of anger towards management since we had a cut of a third of the staff in the last five years and none of our useless managers had any: apart from surfing eBay they don't seem to be doing much themselves.

When the strikes came to a halt lots of people were very angry at the union and couldn't understand it. We had

struck for 18 days in total in London (most of the country had two days) and lots of people said that we could have won more. A postman of 31 years service told me that his experience was that we might as well take the money because Royal Mail always implement things anyway. People are miserable about the insecurity of the job nowadays and the union HQ's soft approach has meant lots of people have lost faith in the top.

There's even been those who said that if they want us out again in the future they are openly going to scab because they feel that the union had their chance and blew it. That was just after we came back though so it's hard to say whether that was said in the heat of the moment or not. In general most people go out when asked to, except our 3-4 acting managers who are half postmen, half managers.

For better or for worse most people tend to blindly follow the union on our floor so if the union recommends a 'yes' vote the bulk usually follows.

But the deal will mean more work and more junkmail. Since I'm in an area with more businesses the amount of junkmail isn't such a problem but the vast majority of workers in other more residential areas will lose out money-wise since at the moment we get paid per item and not a fixed sum. Also having a total of £1200 pay-out waved in front of people will be tempting for a 'yes' vote and the CWU and RM are well aware of that and have always used such 'carrots' in order to implement things.

I don't think there's going to be any major change in union HQ so we face an uphill battle. Among the union leaders even Jane Loftus (a member of the Socialist Workers' Party, until the end of the strike) sold us out: so it seems that power corrupts. We need some form of grassroots network outside of the official union structure in RM.

I myself am already in touch with a couple of guys about a syndicalist-type organisation for propaganda within the business. We need an independent industrial network of postal workers themselves, rather than fronts for Trotskyist groups. We should also be encouraging unofficial strikes and mutual aid with other groups of workers. But this initiative is still at a very early stage yet.



# BA strike: against the race to the bottom

by Gregor Gall

The British Airways dispute is shaping up to be the key union battle of 2010, being on a par with strikes in the engineering construction industry and Royal Mail last year in terms of their significance for the wider labour movement. This is maybe a little odd in that a relatively small number of workers are involved compared to those in the engineering construction industry and Royal Mail. This is a dispute about accommodating to or resisting the 'race to the bottom' under the neo-liberalism.

That said the dispute with BA as an employer and organisation has a significance way beyond the number of staff employed – the profile of the dispute is based on BA still being seen as the national flag carrier despite privatisation and the union being able to benefit from exerting leverage because travel cannot be physically offshored and strike action has an immediate and demonstrable impact upon the business' operations.

When BA was created in 1974 in an act of nationalisation, collective bargaining was enshrined in the legislation to do so. This and the immediate and demonstrable impact of strikes upon the business' operations have meant a well-unionised and strong workforce has been able to leverage up their terms and conditions of employment. This achievement has become all the more apparent as under deregulation, new players have entered the market and begun as non-union operations with much lower pay and conditions.

Yet despite this it is evident that Unite has been wrong footed by BA. First, lengthy negotiations have allowed BA to prepare to undermine the strike. Second, the withdrawal of BA's offer on Thursday 18 March made the union unwillingly have to act on its announced strike pledge. This was revealed by the willingness of Unite to stand down the strikes if the offer was re-tabled even though Unite was initially not willing to recommend it to its members.

So Unite has punched well below its weight here, even though BA's claims about the extent of the striking breaking service it has been able to run have been shown (by independent plane spotters) to be exaggerated.



*BA bosses used anti-union laws to delay the strike but could not force staff to back down*

But this cannot detract from the inability and/or unwillingness of Unite to do more to put increased pressure on BA in order to make the running in restarting the negotiations and on terms that Unite wants.

While Unite would have taken brickbats in the media for calling a 10 or 12 day strike as initially planned, the 3 day then 4 day strike has not been up to the task of facing down a company that clearly wants to break to union and which is very cash rich despite recent losses.

No union can afford to ignore issues of media coverage and levels of public support. Coverage from many media has not been favourable – nothing new there. Yet it has been more balanced, if not necessarily favourable, in the broadsheets and BBC given the hysteria around the dispute because we are in the run up to a general election. Indeed, it has been sufficiently positive that BA has been worried by it and has sought to use its own means to put its case across through youtube.

But this dispute like so many others comes down to numbers – the number of strikers, the number of strike breakers, the number of flights flown and the number of passengers flown. The dispute will essentially be won or lost within BA, not in the court of public opinion, media newsrooms or the House of Commons. The issue of Teamsters' support was not much more than window dressing.

However, there are two caveats to that. If we recall the Gate Gourmet dispute in 2005, unofficial solidarity industrial action – which was authorised by Tony Woodley as T&G general secretary through a nod and a wink – allowed one group of workers to support another. In that case, it was BA workers to Gate Gourmet. This time round it could be Gate Gourmet and/or baggage handlers to cabin crew. This would put much greater pressure on BA – whether in terms of just the threat to do so or doing so for a day. In these circumstances, creative thinking must be used to get around the anti-union laws.

The role for the whole Unite union and wider labour movement is to put lead in the pencil of the strikers. Most obviously, Unite could levy a £1 solidarity payment from each of its 1.4m members. Solidarity donations from other unions could also be raised. This would say to BA that the strikers can afford to sit out a long strike so negating the fact that BA is cash rich and is prepared to lose money now in search of the sacred cow – the unilateral right to vary terms and conditions without union opposition.

The role of the Labour government has been interesting to say the least. On the one hand, it has shown no support for Unite and has gone further by condemning the strikes (where the union rather than management is blamed). Yet, on the other hand, it cannot intervene more actively and effectively in the dispute than it has done – no matter which side it comes down on – because the doctrine of neo-liberalism means that state intervention is spurned. Consequently, it has made no calls for the dispute to go to arbitration, much less forced both sides by political pressure or emergency legislation to do so.

And because 'new' Labour is a neo-liberal project, it has been unable to counter the political onslaught from the Tories on the issue. Long before the strike, it had given up the ability and right to say in a social democratic way, these workers have the right to defend their livelihoods and more power to their elbows in resisting the race to the bottom (even if again it was unprepared to act to support them in deeds rather than just words).

# obamacare: the nuns strike back

by Ernie Haberkern

Berkeley, California

The Health Care Reform bill has finally made it through the archaic legislative labyrinth our slave-owning founding fathers left us. Our modern corporate capitalists have found this unrepresentative system as useful as the slave owners did. One of features of the system is that it facilitates behind-closed-doors dealing that makes it extremely difficult for the average voter, or even the fairly well-informed voter, to find out what exactly the effect of the legislation will actually be. In fact, the result is usually so complicated that it often has consequences unforeseen and unintended by the authors of the legislation.

So what does this 'reform' actually amount to? In the first place, there is no regulation of the cost of drugs. In particular, the current twelve year monopoly granted to companies for brand name drugs remains in effect. This deal was made last August and in return the pharmaceutical industry, which played a major role in the defeat of Bill Clinton's attempt to pass a health care bill, actively lobbied in favor of Obama's plan.

The insurance industry will have some of its most egregious practices outlawed. People can no longer be denied insurance because of a 'pre-existing condition', a vague phrase allowing insurers to deny coverage based on their estimation of the likelihood that they may actually have to pay for some form of treatment. They will also be prohibited from dropping coverage for people who actually get sick even though they may have been paying their premiums, and contributing to a company's profits, for years. In return, the Obama administration, very early on, backed off on a 'public option', that is a government financed competitor to the private insurance industry modeled on Medicare, the government run single payer system for people over 65. Obama had made this a major campaign promise.

The most important victory of the insurance companies, however and the most significant feature of the new system is the forced enrollment, under threat of a fine, of millions of new customers in their plans. It is, in effect, a steeply regressive tax to finance highly-profitable and inefficient corporations. (As compared to Medicare, for example, whose overhead is much lower.)



*the health care reform bill is widely seen as a major personal success for obama*

In addition to this regressive tax, the new system also helps finance this operation by significant cuts in Medicare. The Republicans quite rightly emphasised these cuts in their opposition to 'Obamacare'. Of course, the Republicans opposed Medicare when it was introduced and are themselves in favor of cutting the program. But the Obama administration and the leadership of the Democratic Party were equally demagogic. In the end this is a bill that is aimed not at benefiting Americans who need increasingly expensive health care but at propping up a section of the capitalist economy that was facing disaster. That is the real 'health care crisis' that this new system addresses. The news stories about cancer patients who were being bankrupted because their insurance companies dropped their coverage made headlines but it is not clear that they will be helped. In any case, they are not the intended beneficiaries of this scheme.

The 'health care crisis' that this new system is meant to address was exposed in a curious side story. On 20th March, Maureen Dowd, an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote an article with the headline 'Eraser Duty for Bart?' The subject of the column was a Democratic congressman, Bart Stupak, who, at the bidding of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was threatening to vote against the bill if it did not explicitly forbid the coverage of abortions under the insurance policies paid for by the new system.

Stupak was attacked by religious orders representing tens of thousands of nuns who flooded his office with phone calls. At first Stupak took the position that the bishops and the pope, not a bunch of nuns, ran the Catholic Church. But, a few days later, he publicly announced that he was withdrawing his amendment and would vote for the bill. In return, Obama promised that he would sign an executive order forbidding such misuse of the funds.

As Kathleen Parker pointed out in a column in the *Washington Post* on 24th March, it is not clear whether such an order would legally trump a law passed by Congress and signed by the President. In any case, such a decree could always be rescinded at any time. Parker did not point out that Obama had also promised voters a public option to win their support and then reneged when it became politically expedient.

Maureen Dowd has a lot of fun recounting Bart's troubles with nuns as a Catholic school boy, attributing his reversal of position to the nuns once again 'batting his head against the blackboard'. But there is a more serious issue here which Dowd alludes to but does not dwell on. She quotes Tim Ryan, an anti-abortion Democrat from Ohio as saying: "You say this is pro-abortion yet you have 59,000 Catholic nuns from across the country endorsing this bill, 600 Catholic hospitals, 1,400 Catholic nursing homes endorsing this bill."

The numbers are significant. The orders of nuns who came out against the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops are one of the main sources of labor for Catholic hospitals. As Reed Abelson writing in the *New York Times* of 21st March points out, hospitals are one of the main beneficiaries of the new bill. Hospitals, including for-profit hospitals like some Catholic hospitals, are required to treat patients who show up at their emergency rooms even if they can't pay for the treatment. By forcing such people to buy insurance or pay a fine the hospitals are reimbursed. While it is probably true, as Maureen Dowd claims, that the nuns are motivated by their Christian sympathy for the poor and suffering they, and certainly the religious orders they belong to, also have a financial interest in the legislation just passed. For many of them, their jobs are at stake.

This little incident makes clear who the real beneficiaries of this new system are.



# ESOL students and staff defend childcare

★ Nursery and crèche provision is one of the first things to go when cuts are made at colleges and universities, as the recent examples of the University of Sussex, London Metropolitan University and Manchester College show. Here a teacher of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) at Tower Hamlets College shows how the decision to close the crèche at the outreach centre where she works was successfully overturned following her and her students' campaign. Note: Entry 1 (E1) and Entry 2 (E2) refer to levels of classes for beginner ESOL learners.

by Sally Haywill

What do you do when, without warning, you are told 'Yes, your class now has a new centre to work from, but the students who need childcare must contact the student advisers to arrange a childminder'? You haven't seen the centre yet, nor spoken to any of your students since your last centre was closed to you on Health and Safety grounds. You're just back from holiday, and looking forward to seeing everyone. Still in holiday mode, at first I didn't really take in the implications of this. I hadn't been consulted, there was no discussion. It all felt a bit unreal.

I went to the new centre, Lifra Hall, for the first class. It was great! I felt so happy to see the students again and the centre staff were warm and welcoming. But a quick peep at the spacious, well-equipped yet deserted crèche troubled me. It seemed all wrong that we had wonderful facilities, mothers and children who really needed them, yet were denied them.

I remembered the exhaustion and, at times, desperation that I felt as a mother of very young children. I thought of the decimation of the Outreach department last year. I felt clear about the aims of Outreach ESOL – to try and reach those most in need, most marginalised. I knew, as a mother myself, from thirteen years of Outreach ESOL teaching at Tower Hamlets College and from my other jobs in community development and training, what practical resources and processes work to fulfil those aims.

**“How much did the college pay child-minders? Between £5 and £7 an hour. The minimum wage is £5.82 ”**

And I began to feel anger that something as vital as a crèche had been withdrawn so unilaterally. I asked my students what they thought. They were unanimous, mothers in need of a crèche and not, that an on-site crèche was crucial to enable women with young children to come to ESOL classes.

By January I had three mothers needing a crèche. Two of these had recently given birth and were still breastfeeding. A fourth mother had appeared at my class having had to leave another Outreach class when it moved to a main college site. Then another two mothers asked if they could join the class if we got the crèche.

Gradually a feeling of disbelief, and confusion at the withdrawal of the crèche changed to one of anger and determination to put right this injustice.

The students and I assumed the motive was cost-cutting. I was told there was simply no money. This puzzled me, and I set about trying to get answers to some of my questions.

How many childminders were the college paying, i.e. instead of funding a crèche? I think the answer was two.

How much did the college pay childminders? Between £5 and £7 an hour. The minimum wage is £5.82 per hour.

How much do people pay their dog-walker? Answer, about £10 an hour. Tower Hamlets College is therefore possibly paying women not only below the minimum wage, but certainly less per hour for childcare than people pay for their pets. I feel it is shameful for an education institution to be colluding in our society's lack of valuing of parenting and childcare.

If there had been money to pay for a crèche before Christmas, why and how had this suddenly evaporated? Childcare money is ring-fenced; budgeted for over a year. Trying to get clarity about a crèche budget was impossible. I asked lots of people a great many questions and often got conflicting answers.

I felt it was crucial to act quickly, and try to get a crèche in place as soon as possible. I negotiated a reduced price with the centre and asked my manager for a five week



*“the students were the campaign, and decisions would be taken by consensus”*

'temporary' crèche up to half term to give us time to try and fundraise if necessary. I was turned down.

As the weeks wore on it became apparent that we needed to conduct a campaign. The students were marvellous. The whole class was united in their support for the minority of women needing a crèche. They were very clear of the importance of a crèche for *all* women. The more we were obstructed, the more determined we became.

The students learnt a lot of English through the campaign. We started by discussing the reasons why a crèche is important for women.

We then looked at the political system in the UK. We thought 'Who can help us?' We made a list, and wrote to some of these people to ask for their help. We wrote to MPs, the Students' Union, the Chair of Governors, and visited a local Councillor. We filled in formal complaint forms. We contacted the media. We talked about what had happened so far, what we were doing right now, and what our hopes were for the future. We took the issue to the UCU, who – hooray and three cheers! – sympathetically listened to what we had to say and gave us practical advice and much-needed moral support. We started a petition and distributed it amongst friends, family and colleagues – who were wonderfully supportive. Knowing that other people cared made a huge difference to our morale.

I found the campaigning extremely gruelling, despite the magnificent support we had. It was exhausting trying to constantly think of strategies, make sure everyone was involved and understood what was going on.

I decided that the most important thing was that the students were well informed, involved and that they should decide what they wanted to do. *They* were the campaign, and decisions would be taken by consensus. In this way I reckoned they would not only learn a lot of useful English, but we would all grow in confidence through the process of taking united action.

If we won, then the winning would be due to *everyone's* efforts. Every one of us would have learnt an important political lesson for life – either way. We would learn how to tackle an injustice, what worked and what didn't.

The weeks dragged on. After half term, some two weeks after submitting our formal complaints (the form had said a reply would normally be received within five days) we got a reply from the Head of Student Services. It was dismissive

and unhelpful, merely reiterating their previous position, and couched in language that was very difficult for the students. It didn't offer a meeting to discuss the issue, as stated in the complaints procedure.

We didn't seem to have any luck with the media until we thought of doing a 'newsworthy event' on International Women's Day to highlight our problem. We decided to hold a 'Teddy Bears Picnic' in a very public place. Having got absolutely nowhere with appeals within the college, we felt we had no alternative but to take the issue to a wider public and go ahead with our action.

**“If we won, then the winning would be due to *everyone's* efforts”**

On the freezing cold Monday morning on 8 March, a small but cheery band of students, from my class and others, set off to Liverpool Street. We took our banner 'Save Our Crèche' (made by the students from a pashmina bought for £1 from Whitechapel Market!), Teddy Bears and a picnic lunch. We whizzed round the Gherkin (where we were speedily hustled away by security), Liverpool Street Station and RBS, holding up our banner for photos at each place.

Later that week, nine weeks after being told 'no', we were told that the Vice Principal had decided we *could* have our crèche! We were delighted and surprised. Clearly not all the money had gone.

We held a party at the end of term to celebrate. The students, as with every aspect of the campaign, discussed, organised and acted together in undertaking the practical tasks needed. The lively buzz of conversation amongst the students, the radiant faces, the dimpled smiles of the babies and children in the crèche – all visible signs of a happy outcome for this class.

But I think there is a deeper achievement not so easily seen. Each and every one who helped, in whatever way, can be proud to have contributed to a success. For the students, they have challenged a large institution. They stood up for what they believed was right, and have grown in confidence as a result.

However, there is still a long way to go. My other, E1 class, still has no crèche, and none is in sight. Many women, maybe 40 or 50, are on Tower Hamlets College waiting lists for ESOL classes but cannot join because there is no childcare. Oxford House will have no on-site crèche when the Bethnal Green Centre moves there shortly.



# 20 years of namibian independence

by Jade McClune

Twenty years ago, at Namibia's first independence celebrations on 21st March, 1990, many people would have shared the hopes and the euphoria of the moment. People thought that something good would come to us if we kept our peace and relinquished all the power to "the few who knew".

Now that terrible hangover is wearing off and time has enforced a certain sobriety on us: the brutish reality of a rapidly falling life expectancy, unprecedented epidemic crises, poverty, vast malnutrition, a ruined education system and chronic mass unemployment, is inescapable.

Yes, there have been achievements: for some people with connections or capital or a lot of luck, life has improved as they moved into the other side of town, but for most citizens life has become meaner and shorter. There is a breakdown of all social and municipal services and a growing chauvinistic brutishness about the bureaucracy. At the same time we are witnessing a new desperate scramble for Africa's mineral wealth, that will make the evils of 19th century colonialism look pleasant in comparison. So let it be said, the struggle is not over.

We must speak the truth to power, insisted the Palestinian scholar, Edward Said. And in Namibia the truth is that there is actually a war going on, a secret war, a war of the rich against the poor.

Now the ruling class and the ruling South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) party have chosen their team for parliament, but the poor and unemployed, the destitute and the diseased, the hungry and depressed -- though still pacified and disorientated by the shock of post-colonial economic reality - remain a lurking threat to the established order of extracting our natural wealth. Although there is a call for all to pull together as a nation now, there are many forces more strongly pulling us apart.

The ideological hegemony and control of the nationalists is not as strong as it was two decades ago when the whole world was celebrating "the miracle". Because even now there is no clear way to resolve the outstanding tasks of the national democratic revolution under SWAPO (or the African National Congress in South Africa) leadership. The land and natural resources are still under foreign ownership and control and the majority live in a concentration of shacks. This very day, after returning from Namibia's celebrations South African President Jacob Zuma was faced with masses of people marching for houses, jobs and a decent life in Durban.

Today SWAPO does not claim to be leading the Namibian revolution. The party has gone over entirely, decisively and openly to the side of global capital and actually facilitates the extraction economy as the party of law and order, so it acts



*SWAPO has been the dominant party since independence, winning 75% in the 2009 election*

not so much as a representative of the people, but rather performs an "overseer", or managerial function on behalf of Western capital. This is reflected above all in the government's neoliberal economic strategy, which involves giving everything up to the highest bidder. That much is becoming clear to everyone. Today we are faced with an even greater threat to our health and safety as government begins to soften up and open up the country to whore itself to the world as an easy source of uranium.

For all these terrible reasons the representatives of capital, in the form of an emerging national capitalist class, must come more and more into direct conflict with the people who are bearing the brunt of so much exploitation and inequality. The reason being that increasingly the conflicting class interests that separate the political elites from the masses of rural and urban poor, make rubbish of the notion that the elites represent the national interest, as they are openly seen as allies and accomplices of international capital, so the workers who have to pay for it all, including the accompanying pomp and ceremony, are forced to rethink our position, because not only our jobs, but often our very lives depend on it.

If we scratch beneath the surface of this idea of the "national interest", we find that it refers to the partial interests of the ruling class and economic interest groups. Radical analysis has been suppressed from the national debates in the mainstream, but we must persist in presenting the perspective from the left and show that unbridled capitalism is at the

core of the social contradiction and crisis engulfing, and indeed devouring, the country.

This is not an isolated view. As a barometer of international opinion one need only refer to the motion debated by the Friends of Namibia and the Royal African Society at the Houses of Parliament in London on 18th March, which proposed that Namibia is a shining example of democracy, good governance and post colonial development. It was voted down.

The point is for us not to base ourselves on vague hopes and fantasies, nice as they may be, but on our real historical experience. Our history is contested, that is true, but it is being reclaimed and rewritten from below. That is a basis for reclaiming our future. Based on the experience of the past 20 years, the working class must prepare itself for a period of renewed struggle as we face attacks on our living and working standards; we must prepare for renewed struggles to defend our communities from the causes and effects of superexploitation and from privatisation of services. We will have to struggle for a renewed understanding that only the combined force, effort and will of the working class can solve the cause of economic inequality and lead the oppressed people of the country out of this crisis.

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## terre'blanche, 'black boers' and the class war

by Adam Ford

On 3rd April, notorious South African white supremacist Eugène Terre'Blanche was murdered on his farm by two young black workers. It has been claimed that Terre'Blanche (whose French surname ironically means 'white land') owed the men months of back wages, and even that there was a sexual element. But whatever the specifics, the political storm surrounding the case has made it clear that social class is the chasm dividing 'the new South Africa'.

Terre'Blanche gained some infamy in the UK with his appearance on one of 'Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends', and Theroux's fellow documentarist Nick Broomfield also examined 'His Big White Self'. But in reality, Terre'Blanche had long been a marginal political figure.

He founded the Afrikaner Resistance Movement in 1973, in response to apartheid President PW Botha's perceived liberalism. As the African National Congress of Nelson Mandela continued on the long march to power, Terre'Blanche threatened civil war, and led his supporters into battle with police at the 'Battle of Ventersdorp'. But impoverished blacks were rebelling in the townships, and it was clear to the white elite that they had no choice other than handing over the reins to Mandela, a representative of the aspirational "non-European bourgeoisie" (as Mandela had described his coterie as far back as 1956).

Terre'Blanche did not mellow post-apartheid. In 1997, he was jailed for the attempted murder of a black security guard, and four years later he was back in prison for beating a farm worker so badly that he was left brain damaged.



*good riddance: but after 15 years under ANC rule the black majority remain in poverty*

With some white farmers doing well under the new system, Terre'Blanche was now something of an embarrassment.

Ok then, a racist thug is dead; so far, so good riddance. But the reaction of the ruling African National Congress says much more about the state of contemporary South African society. President Jacob Zuma (the party's third, following Mandela and Thabo Mbeki) denounced the "terrible deed",

called for calm, and warned South Africans "not to allow agents provocateurs to take advantage of this situation by inciting or fuelling racial hatred."

However, that is exactly what ANC Youth Leader Julius Malema has been doing, by quoting lyrics from apartheid-era song 'Dubula Ibhunu' ('Kill The Boer', with the term 'Boer' meaning 'white farmer').

In government, the ANC has overseen the funnelling of new international investment to a small layer of black business leaders, while poverty and inequality has increased amongst working people of all ethnicities.

Last month saw the fiftieth anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre, when police killed sixty-nine unarmed black protesters, giving birth to greater black militancy as they did so. The ANC has traded on the memory of Sharpeville ever since, and indeed Mandela signed the post-apartheid constitution there. But February 2010 saw riots, as demonstrators against deprivation and ANC hypocrisy clashed with the majority black police force, who responded with gunfire, in a sinister echo of their apartheid predecessors.

'Kill The Boer' has now been ruled unconstitutional by the high court, but today's marchers sing a new song: 'Amabhunu amnyama asenzela I -worry' ('Black Boers give us worry'). Amidst the global recession, President Zuma is defending white as well as black elements amongst the rich, while young leaders such as Malema feels the need to channel street anger into the safe cul-de-sac of racism. But the truth is becoming obvious to the broad masses of people, and the stage is set for an explosion in class-based conflict.



# gender, nation, class

by Aitemad Muhannah

Since Hamas was first established as an Islamic political movement within Palestinian society in December 1987 the leftist movement in Palestine has gradually come to be fragmented, and seems to be losing its popular constituency.

My own background as a women's activist belonging to the PFLP from the 1980s until the mid-1990s leads me to argue that leftist parties and their popular grassroots organisations developed historically from incoherent ideological underpinnings, and that this has critically constrained their influence on Palestinians' own systems of values and beliefs.

These leftist movements mostly failed to internalise their ideology among the population, because they maintained an artificial divorce between national politics and ideology on the one hand, and popular social and cultural change on the other. They were afraid of antagonising popular opinion by openly mobilising against traditional systems of values, especially those based on patriarchy and/or Islam. On the other hand Islamic political movements, especially Hamas, showed a more creative capacity to act effectively, shaping their national political and social agenda around the ideology of Islamic faith, belief and practice.

The massive popular support, emotional and even spiritual attachment that arose for leftist parties during the 1970s and until around the end of the First Intifada in 1991, could have been presumed to encourage the internalisation of at least some of the values and beliefs of leftist ideology – including democracy, social justice and individual liberties. The problem was certainly not mass rejection of these values or practices, which later became the mainstream discourse used by the leftist parties' NGOs, which have largely been funded by the West.

However, the problem was that many poorer and less educated Palestinians, especially those marginalised social groups living in camps and smaller villages, were not influenced that much by leftist ideology. To put it another way, these social and cultural segments of the population were not actually able to relate to leftist ideology through their day-to-day life, and instead found their concerns reflected only in through involvement in national resistance. People were drawn to nationalist resistance agendas, rather than secular and leftist parties' agendas, which reduced the appeal of the secular left when it turned from resistance to inconclusive negotiations.

During this process, many more marginalised Palestinian constituents started to feel alienated as well as patronised by the leftist leadership's contradictory practices, and objected to the narrow factional and personal interests, the authoritarianism of the leadership and the tendency for cronyism in dealings with the population. The record thus suggests that the leftist leadership failed to seize its opportunity to create a positive model of political, social and cultural practices that could challenge the historically dominant hierarchical and authoritarian mode of governing and leadership and attract a strong following and support base among the majority of Palestinians. Few concrete positive changes and little substantial progress were achieved by secular and leftist parties' reliance on a negotiated solution.

The result was that many ordinary Palestinians started to search for alternative forms of political organisation that could maintain their sense of national resistance, whilst providing them with a system of values and moral principles. With the entrenchment of compromised secular elite, Hamas offered a political and moral discourse to fill the social and cultural environment gap where secular and leftist parties had failed to meet the interests and desires of the disadvantaged majority.

## Rethinking Leftist Discourse in relation to Islamism

This analysis is supported by some existing research. It is also a reflection of my personal experience, having been actively involved in community and political mobilisation with PFLP grass-roots students' and women's unions from the 1980s to the mid-1990s.

My belonging to PFLP - the prominent leftist party within the Palestinian national movement - was politically, ideologically and spiritually profound for me, as for many others in the PFLP. As women and men within the leftist movement, we devoted much time and effort to educating and convincing other young men and women about concepts like resistance for national liberation, and the centrality of social justice in the national liberation process. We concentrated our efforts round the camps in the Gaza Strip, visiting prisoners,



women supporters of the PFLP

martyrs and injured families, providing material and emotional support. As young men and women, we also participated in public demonstrations, and in street clashes with Israeli soldiers, helping and covering for our male colleagues on resistance missions. We were collectively working for the sake of our Palestinian people who were (and are) all victimised by Israeli occupation. At that time, we were taught to combine the ideology of national resistance with the Marxist ideology of class struggle, but struggles against social and cultural discriminatory practices based on gender, were not stressed and were not core to our political concerns.

From a national resistance standpoint, I believe that the PFLP's success in popular mobilisation in the 1970s-80s lay in organising and mobilising the masses, and was based on our personal commitment and grassroots organisations in building relationships with people on the ground. We succeeded in this because we had a legitimate (national, just) cause to defend, a mission to implement, and because we had a strong belief that it was right to oppose and try to stop the forms of colonial oppression against our people that we confronted daily. We were known and trusted by people, had easy access to them in their houses and workplaces, and cared about them, as well as being there to help them when needed. Our tasks needed daily, tiring, time-consuming effort in networking and organising, and we knew the constituency of the PFLP on a personal level, and communicated with them face-to-face. Our activism was based on conviction and voluntarism.

**“The performance of the Palestinian Authority, from its early phase, was characterised by high levels of corruption, patronage and clientelism.”**

In the 1980s till the second or third year of the First Intifada (1988/89), I was in my early 20s, and I was enjoying my involvement in the national resistance and leftist movement, considering that this determined my national identity. I did not think or feel that I was subordinated or oppressed as a woman, because I believed that working class 'poor refugees' who led the national struggle against the colonial occupation would become equal and find justice through national liberation on a left agenda.

With these enthralling ideas, I shaped my personal choices. I was born and grew up in a refugee family headed by a merchant who earned a good income, and lived all my childhood in a non-refugee area with relatively good standards of living. I decided to get out of this class structure by marrying one of the PFLP resistance militants from a refugee camp, and went to live in the camp which I had not visited until before I married. I achieved this goal, and had been living in the refugee Beach camp in Gaza for one year by the time the First Intifada began.

With no education in feminism or gender equality, I shared everything with my husband, including his tasks in political resistance. He used to ask me to help him with some missions, and never made me feel subordinate or ignored. At that time, I thought that the ethics of all members of leftist parties were like this: that they respected their wives, sisters, and daughters and considered them equals with the men in the family and in the public. Until the second year of the First Intifada, my multiple identities as a woman, Palestinian, and leftist were not in tension, and I did not experience them as in any way contradictory.

During those first two years of the First Intifada, living in the Beach camp, I became well known by many refugees as a PFLP activist, involved in the process of grass-roots mobilisation for resistance. I was seen walking in the camp unveiled, in modern though modest dress, several times a day. I was also seen involved in food distribution and social visits to families in need. I was observed participating in demonstrations against the Israeli soldiers. Yet in the summer of 1988, while walking in the camp with modest dress which showed, from my ethical leftist point of view, my respect to the martyrs of the Intifada, I was shocked at having eggs, tomatoes, and later stones thrown at me by young boys from the Beach camp.

When I later asked “why did you do this to a woman who is almost the same age as your mother?” they just replied: “you have to put on the head scarf because of the Intifada” and then ran away. I did not really take this incident seriously, however, until it was repeated by teenagers and older boys who threw things and shouted at me and at other women in the camp. Then I started to feel threatened, and started to hear more stories of women in other parts of Gaza, some of whom were attacked with acid. I was unable – within my own terms - to understand or analyze such actions and they threatened me to such a point that I felt I should leave home and proceed with my voluntary community activism elsewhere.

I assumed at that time that the whole Beach camp was secured by the PFLP. Yet the PFLP resistance group (mainly men in their early 20s) were informed about these incidents of attack and harassment, but did nothing to stop them. I also heard from friends that members of the PFLP resistance group said it was not their business to intervene in such cases, since women could solve the problem themselves simply by putting on the headscarf. The pressure to cover up meant nothing to the young men leading the First Intifada because they saw no reason for women not to be veiled in a traditional society like Gaza. I never myself thought about putting on the headscarf, or of veiling myself, whether in traditional or popular form. Not because they stood for oppression, but because they were either simply a personal religious practice or a cultural and national symbol.

I decided to negotiate this issue with my husband, who was in a leading position in the PFLP national resistance. However his reply to me was shocking. He made the same statement the young field militants had made, those who were responsible for maintaining security in the camp. He said: “We know that these incidents are most likely done by Hamas members, but we are not now in a position to open a fight with them. We need to keep our national unity against the occupation. Just you throw a scarf on your head and stop those boys harassing you in the street”.

That was the crisis point for me as a person and I started to question my gender identity, and find contradictions with my identity as a PFLP activist and Palestinian nationalist. My active commitment to national resistance and mass mobilisation counted for nothing when it came to the veil and protection by my leftist party and its members. That ran counter to my whole understanding of the leftist ideology, which stood against all forms of oppression. And I asked myself: is the imposition of a certain practice by another ideology, within the same class, not a form of oppression or discrimination? Do political and national alliances justify disrespect to women's free choice? If so, should I compromise my gender identity for the sake of my national identity, in the time when religious veiling was not yet a dominant cultural practice (for example, my father never imposed veiling on me and many women at different age groups were unveiled in 1970s and 1980s).

That was the watershed that awakened my hidden gender identity. For the first time in my life, I started to think about my identity as a woman, and how it was obscured by my identity as a nationalist leftist subject. I also started to link the nationalist ideology with the leftist ideology which I, and

# and the first intifada

other women's activists, learnt from leftist men and based on their interpretation. I could no longer take for granted the link between national liberation and individuals/women's freedom.

The issue of women and their subordinated position in the Gaza society was not part of the PFLP education or mobilisation agendas, and it was sidelined by the PFLP thinkers in favour of a tradition and value system which needed to be preserved as part of a national Palestinian identity. I remember that, from the leftist men's point of view, all forms of social and cultural inequality would be resolved by national liberation, and by the leftist parties gaining political power.

Second, by the awakening of my gender identity, I also discovered the contradictory practice of leftist social and moral principles. I found out that many of the PFLP leaders (middle-aged men) restricted the movements of their wives and sisters and did not allow them to participate in national struggle: to maintain family honour. I also recalled that while I was a student at BirZeit University, the male leaders of the leftist parties, including the PFLP, were allowed to have girlfriends and sexual relations with women from middle and upper class, on the pretext of mobilising them, while refugee poor students, who led the process of mobilisation among students, encountered gossip if they deviated from cultural norms. All these examples of contradictory practices implied that the leftist parties had failed to produce a new system of social and cultural values and beliefs, despite their success at certain period of time in mobilising the masses for national resistance.

This is the historical foundation that helped Hamas, by the end of the First Intifada, to have a fertile ground for the mainstreaming of its ideological and political strategy and action. Hamas leaders, since the early years of its establishment, learnt how to bargain and cooperate to advance their political agenda, but without jeopardising the religious ideological beliefs (that were always open to reinterpretation). One early example was their statement regarding the attacks against unveiled women. They publicly announced that Hamas main concern was resistance against the occupation and it was not associated with these attacks, but they did not condemn the attacks.

Leftist secular parties, on the other hand, implicitly vindicated Hamas by stating in their bayans 'leaflets' that these attacks against women were done by collaborators with the Israeli occupation. This reflected the leftist leadership's understanding of women, not as equal nationalist agents who need to be protected, but as a sexual target who may jeopardise the unity of national resistance and a social cohesion based on male domination.

Hamas won the game of mass mobilisation by maintaining the national resistance discourse on the top of its agenda, and enhanced the ideological religious values and beliefs to flexibly and consistently determine the meaning and the practice of national resistance as well as social and cultural norms. For example, the common saying Hamas leaders used is that the one who resists the Israeli occupation has to resist all forms of corruption and anti-ethical practices - presumably the anti-ethical is always anti-Islamic. Or as mentioned in a Sara Roy article, Hamas leaders advocate that Palestinians defeat the Israeli occupation by preserving their culture and value system and Islam. By this discourse, men and women, who were not influenced by a different social and cultural value system and they were historically dominated by the fluid traditional understanding and practice of Islam, felt at home with the presentation of politics within the moral principles of Islam.

The inability or reluctance of the leftist parties to protect women against the imposition of veil, attributing this to the priority of national unity, was a gift to Hamas. By 1989, the majority of women in Gaza were veiled and that was an important symbolic sign of Islamisation of Gazan society, even if it was forced in many cases. This symbolic sign was, a few years later, better consolidated by Hamas's pragmatic strategies.

By the beginning of the Oslo peace negotiations in 1993, by the slowdown of the rhythm of national military resistance against the occupation, and by the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, a new ideological battle started. Although some leftist parties did not fully get involved in the peace negotiations and showed their rejection in the beginning, they decided to get fully involved in the

establishment of the Palestinian Authority. The leftist parties also became divided and lost many of their common political and ideological views.

The secular leftist leaders, including those who partially rejected Oslo agreement, started to negotiate the division of the Palestinian Authority cake (who is controlling what and on what factional and personal bases). The performance of the Palestinian Authority, from its early phase, was characterised by high levels of corruption, patronage and clientelism. I was close to many of the PFLP male and female activists from the camps in the years of the Palestinian Authority, and I noticed that most of them were mainly concerned to get jobs in the Palestinian security forces or Ministries, as a reward for their national resistance. Some of them succeeded in getting jobs through their close connection with the PFLP leaders, but the majority, who were the poorest, were deprived because they did not have strong *wasta* (a network), taking into consideration that the majority of jobs were given to Fatah.

**“And I asked myself: is the imposition of a certain practice by another ideology, within the same class, not a form of oppression or discrimination? Do political and national alliances justify disrespect to women's free choice?”**

Within this context, Hamas was working in silence developing its agendas to utilise the division among the leftist parties and the losing of their constituency by not being rewarded with jobs. Hamas remained strict with its rejection of the Oslo agreement and its institutional apparatuses.

In the period of 1994-2000, Hamas realised that continuing in national militant resistance was not the appropriate strategy within the new national political equation produced by the peace process. Hamas decided to shift its concern from political military action to social and community work as well as the mass mobilisation of religious values and practices. Hamas established a large number of community-based charitable associations providing humanitarian support to families in need, as claimed by Hamas members, those who were deprived of their basic needs by the corrupt secular government. Hamas at this time enhanced religious education through the mosques, which attracted a large number of poor women and children from the camps and rural areas. This practice achieved a high level of credibility and trustworthiness, because it flourished while the secular and leftist parties displayed a corrupt and immoral model of governing.

Hamas community activists, in contrast, show an open-minded democratic vision and practice - even if expressed with a different ideological language. Based on my observation, Hamas activists allowed anyone qualified to work with them. They also tried to be fair in distributing food and cash assistance, regardless the factional loyalty of applicants. This of course pushed many of those who used to be loyal to leftist parties, with no ideological underpinnings, to benefit from the Islamic associations' assistance, and later they became more integrated into their religious educational and social programs.

Deprived people in Gaza, like in other parts of the world, don't need to think about the political factional motives or interests beyond these practices, as long as these practices satisfy their needs and self-respect, and are consistent with their system of values and belief. Hamas's institutional community-based activities were largely influencing women, including those who were participating in the leftist parties' women's committees, because women were encouraged to get out of their homes and to participate in community activities to meet both their national and religious obligations. One of my female friends who used to be very active with the leftist grass-roots organisations said to me: “within Islamic community organisations, I feel more liberated as a woman because I really do what I want to do with respect from my family members, neighbours, and over all satisfy my God.”

Furthermore, Hamas's strategy of social and community work was presented as well as practiced to enhance collectivism and voluntarism. Despite Hamas's hidden political agenda and the actual sources of funds to their community work, they frequently urged Palestinian wealthy people to

donate for supporting poor people appealing for Islamic justice. They also organised the collection of *el Zakat* and ensured its fair distributions.

I am not here arguing about accurate or inaccurate performance of social justice, but I am arguing that Hamas has deliberately focused on the immoral practices of politics by the secular and leftist leadership in order to extract more popular support to its 'moral' religious discourse, to the ideological ground of its politics. This discourse appealed to the poor and disadvantaged people who suffered for years from the corruption of the official institutions.

Hamas, in addition, deliberately built upon the existing traditional values of collectivism and voluntarism, and did not replace family and kin informal institutions by religious institutions. What they do is that they maintained *el-dawaween* and *lejan el-Islah* (informal traditional social and family-based institutions), but incorporated their members and preachers into them. The training of large number of young and middle age people, particularly women, to be preachers who provided in-home visits and religious counseling rapidly increased the religious awareness of the masses.

One example from my PhD field research in 2008 is that moderately educated women in their middle age with young children were competing over who has more religious knowledge and tools of interpretation than the other, and who attended more religious lectures. The more religiously educated became more legitimised to participate in public mobilisation. If I compare this with my period of activism with PFLP, I remember that the members of the regular awareness meetings of the leftist ideology rarely attended, and they did not show that much interest. In contrast, those best versed in leftist ideology were the least involved in daily mass mobilisation.

I assume that one of the obvious reasons is that the presentation and the discussion of the concepts were not conceived as relevant to the actual life of ordinary people. I myself remember how class struggle was explained to me in a way that created a hostile sense towards many of my own people who were classified by the Marxist as bourgeoisie, even those who lived in the camps but in a better material standard of living. On the contrary, through my conversations with my research participants, they express how their awareness about religion enhanced their sense of cooperation and connectedness with those who are better-off within the family and in the local community, based on the Islamic concept of a 'person's fate as God's will'. Of course, I don't deny the problematic as well as the different Islamic interpretations of this concept, but it can serve to overcome differences and promote collectivism.

The last point I need to mention is that although Hamas found its path based on community-based work and mass mobilisation, the left missed their path by abandoning their history of grass-roots work. By the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the increasing interest of donor agencies to fund and to develop civil society institutions, most of the leftist parties' grass-roots organisations shifted their concern and their strategy of work towards 'NGOisation', as it is described by *Islah Jad*. The grass-roots committees and unions were replaced by, or restructured as, NGOs.

Without going into arguments about the role of NGOs, I would like simply to say that this phenomenon played a critical role in undermining the politics and the ideology of the leftist parties as a whole. NGOs, in order to meet the professional requirements of the donors, have to be managed by professionals who speak the language of the donors, they also had to concentrate on networking with the international agencies at the expense of their local community, reduced to a means of generating funds for staff and structures of NGOs.

Ideologically, secular and leftist NGOs contributed to a dilution of class identities and the emergence of a new 'class' of professionals among those who used to act as community volunteers and activists. With such a position comes a better standard of living, and the new professionals often move to the cities, send their children to private schools and drive expensive cars. The space they vacate in poor local communities in the camps and villages was smoothly filled by the Islamic preachers and Hamas community activists. Is this not a great opportunity for the Islamist message to spread, in the absence of any alternatives at the political, ideological and socio-cultural levels?



# the deficit! the deficit! but what about unemployment?

by Oisín Mac Giollamóir

Listening to the debate in the media today you would conclude that there is consensus amongst economists that the key problem of the UK economy is the deficit. And the key question is how to cut it. And the key election issue therefore should be how to cut spending. This is not the case.

Working backwards, perhaps the most ridiculous issue here is the notion that the only way of cutting the deficit is by cutting spending. Fraser Nelson of *The Spectator* goes so far as to say, "Cameron should ban the word 'deficit' and simply say 'overspend' instead." It would seem that some right-wing commentators can't add. A deficit arises when revenue is less than expenditure. An equally good way of cutting the deficit is by increasing revenue, i.e., by raising taxes. Saying the deficit is an 'overspend' is as idiotic as calling the deficit an 'undertax'.

This is not to say that increased taxes would necessarily benefit UK workers. Contrary to popular belief, the UK does not have a progressive taxation system. It has a regressive taxation system. A progressive tax system is one where the people most able to pay taxes do indeed pay more. A regressive one is where either everyone pays the same or where the less well off pay more than the better off.

According to the ONS (Office of National Statistics), in the UK, the poorest 20% pay 38.7% of their income in tax, while the wealthiest 20% pay only 34.8% of their income in tax. The confusion regarding this arises because people frequently only think of taxes in terms of income tax, which is progressive, but ignore council tax and indirect taxes such as VAT. However, there is abundant evidence that increased taxes matched with increased social spending makes society more equal, i.e., it increases the wealth of the least wealthy and decreases the wealth of the wealthiest.

With that said, it is interesting to consider the current debate regarding Brown's proposed increases in National Insurance Contributions (NIC). Brown, while he can be criticised for a lot of things, has a rather strong understanding of economics. He explained the increase in NIC on the basis that it was fairer than an increase in VAT. On this he was technically correct, although an increase in the 50% rate of income tax would be even fairer.

The confusion on the NIC proposals arise with claims from the Tories and the employers that it is a 'tax on jobs', a tax on employers to discourage them from employing more. It isn't. NIC can be thought of as two taxes, one paid by the employee, the other by the employer. But, as with every tax, the issue isn't really who it is levied on, but who actually pays it, and there is pretty strong evidence that payroll taxes that employers pay, such as the NIC, are partially paid by employers but primarily paid by workers, in the form of lower wages. The tax is not really as 'fair' or egalitarian as Brown suggests. It's a tax on workers. The Tories are either being dishonest or too stupid to understand that this is not a tax on employers but rather a tax on employees. And Labour isn't admitting what the tax really is.

The debate over NIC is interesting because it shows that the Tories are not serious about cutting the deficit. Rather they simply want to cut public spending and adamantly refuse to levy any tax on business or the wealthy. The Tory line is cut spending and pay for what's left by taxing the least well off workers.

As mentioned above, you can cut a deficit in two ways; by cutting spending and/or increasing taxes. But neither party seems all that interested in increasing taxes and neither is even considering redressing the existing tax injustice where the poorest pay relatively more in tax. However, all this has presumed that the media consensus is correct and that the key problem of the UK economy today is the deficit. This consensus is wrong. The key problem of the UK economy today is *not* the deficit, it's unemployment.

The unemployment rate is currently 7.8 per cent, 150% of what it was in January 2008. There are nearly two and a half million people actively looking for work in the UK. Despite a 0.1% decrease in unemployment in the last quarter, the number of people unemployed for more than 12 months is still increasing and is the highest it's been since 1997. The number of economically inactive people of working age (i.e. people who are neither working nor 'actively looking for



*in a pre-election debate on channel 4 the three main parties' candidates for chancellor explained the need for sharp cuts in the deficit*

work') increased by 371,000 over the last year to reach 8.16 million in the three months to January 2010.

The figures are even more shocking when you look at young people, where the unemployment rate is 14.8%. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that 20% of young white workers are out of work, 31% of young Asian or Asian-British workers and a shocking 48% of young black workers. That means effectively one in every two young black workers in the UK cannot find work!

This is particularly disturbing given that a growing pool of research shows young people are disproportionately affected by periods of unemployment. It has been found that youth unemployment can have a permanent impact on health status, job satisfaction and wellbeing, and can lead to reduced wages not just in the short term but throughout an individual's lifetime.

**"up and down the length of the country, workers are suffering from unemployment and neither the Tories, Labour nor Lib Dems seem to be all that fussed about it."**

However, despite this, relatively little is being said about unemployment in the UK today. Instead, everything is about the deficit and the need to cut spending regardless of the obvious and significant negative impact that would have on unemployment. Conservative shadow Chancellor George Osborne has argued that "[t]here is no choice between going for growth today and dealing with our debts tomorrow." As with much recent economic debate, this is idiotic. This statement is essentially that "borrowing is impossible". Obviously borrowing is possible, Osborne could argue it's a bad idea but to say that that choice doesn't exist is idiotic.

Indeed, no less a bastion of socialist radicalism than the International Monetary Fund has argued in a recent study that 'going for growth today and dealing with our debts tomorrow' is a good idea. They argue that cutting spending too quickly could damage the economic recovery.

"Unwinding public intervention too early," the IMF argues, "could jeopardise progress in securing a sustained economic recovery... One of the key lessons from experiences of similar crises is that a premature withdrawal of policy stimulus can be very costly, particularly if the financial system is weak. Thus, in the current context, the potential risks associated with an early withdrawal of policy stimulus seem to outweigh the risks of maintaining it for longer than possibly needed."

So what is Osborne rambling on about? In his Mais Lecture in February, 'A New Economic Model', Osborne laid out his economic theory most clearly, saying that, "[p]erhaps the most significant contribution to our understanding of the origins of the crisis has been made by Professor Ken

Rogoff, former Chief Economist at the IMF, and his co-author Carmen Reinhart.

"As Rogoff and Reinhart demonstrate convincingly, all financial crises ultimately have their origins in one thing - rapid and unsustainable increases in debt.... So while private sector debt was the cause of this crisis, public sector debt is likely to be the cause of the next one. As Ken Rogoff himself puts it, "there's no question that the most significant vulnerability as we emerge from recession is the soaring government debt. It's very likely that will trigger the next crisis as governments have been stretched so wide." The latest research suggests that once debt reaches more than about 90% of GDP the risks of a large negative impact on long term growth become highly significant."

This 90% figure is getting bandied about a lot and also comes from Reinhart and Rogoff's book. However, in the book this 90% figure plays little to no role. And in a recent Financial Times article Reinhart and Rogoff warn against introducing massive cuts. They write, "[g]iven the likelihood of continued weak consumption growth in the US and Europe, rapid withdrawal of stimulus could easily tilt the economy back into recession."

Other economists have been even more disparaging of Conservative plans for cuts and their theoretical 'justification' for them. Nobel Laureate and former World Bank Chief Economist Joseph Stiglitz referred to Tory plans to cut spending as "incredulous". He likened their proposals to those of Herbert Hoover, the US President who oversaw the development of the Great Depression, by calling the Tories "Hooverites".

Stiglitz is even harsher with the notion bandied about by the Tories that Britain is about to turn into Greece and is at risk of default. He says to Osborne, "I say you're crazy - economically you clearly have the capacity to pay. The debt situation has been worse in other countries at other times. This is all scaremongering, perhaps linked to politics, perhaps rigged to an economic agenda, but it's out of touch with reality."

And indeed Stiglitz is right. But not only has the debt situation been worse in other countries, historically it's been worse in the UK. Indeed, for the *entire* period of the industrial revolution the UK had public debt above the supposed threshold of 90%. UK public debt went first over 90% in 1746 and did not come down below 90% until 1863. That's unsustainable debt being sustained for a period of 117 years!

That is not to say that this level of debt can be taken on without costs. Rather it merely shows that the notion that the UK is on the verge of disaster unless the deficit is cut and public debt is taken under control. The UK is not on the verge of disaster. But up and down the length of the country, workers are suffering from unemployment and neither the Tories, Labour nor Lib Dems seem to be all that fussed about it.



# ‘blair plus’: a future fair for all?

by David Broder

“Five more years”, the Brown loyalists chanted as the outgoing Prime Minister launched the Labour Party’s election manifesto. But what would Labour do if re-elected? *A future fair for all* is supposed to have the answers

Asked whether the 78-page manifesto was ‘Blairite’, Peter Mandelson told the BBC that the document was in fact ‘Blair-plus’. So what in this document justifies the view common to much of the left that voting for this programme is a “class vote” against the Tories?

Well, in reality the manifesto promises more of the same, even though the document is littered with expressions of ‘rebuilding’, ‘renewal’, ‘no more business as usual’. This vocabulary lends the document an amusingly preposterous tone, not least Gordon Brown’s assertion as he introduced the manifesto “Yes, we *are* in the future business.” Similarly the unusual slogan “the next stage of national renewal” is littered throughout the document.

The Labour manifesto is stridently nationalist in tone, and indeed opens with the words, “This General Election is fought as our troops are bravely fighting to defend the safety of the British people and the security of the world in Afghanistan. They bring great pride and credit to our country: we honour and will always support them.”

Moreover a quite appalling fifth chapter entitled “Crime and immigration” proclaims that “coming to Britain is a privilege not a right” and promises a harsh clampdown on immigration. As well as cutting translation services and English classes, making English tests harder and increasing pressure on migrants to learn English, the manifesto promises expansion of the Migrant Impact Fund, whereby migrants themselves have to pay contributions to help local areas deal with the damage immigration supposedly causes.

The manifesto asserts the need to “ensure that all employees who have contact with the public possess an appropriate level of English language competence” and that “we get the migrants our economy needs, but no more”, supposedly in the interest of taxpayers. The wording of every line of each of these proposals suggests that migrants are either criminals or potential criminals: not part of “we”, not part of the “public”, not “taxpayers”. But they are.

Unite deputy general secretary Jack Dromey, who once upon a time strongly associated himself with the migrant



*labour’s twee imagery masks a sinister agenda*

workers’ cause (see issue 12) commented at the manifesto launch “there is one party in Britain that hears the voice of working people”. It is nice that his union’s leaders can get a “hearing” given that it ploughed £3.6 million of members’ money into Labour coffers last year (securing Jack himself a safe seat in Erdington) but it is certainly not the case that working people exercise a voice – never mind real control – over the party.

While some broadcasters made much of the fact that the manifesto does not refer to further privatising the post – perceived as a crumb to the Communication Workers’ Union – since its launch Labour aides have briefed that this is not a guarantee that they will not do so, and indeed on *Newsnight*, manifesto author Ed Miliband refused to clarify the matter.

This highlights the rather bizarre character of the manifesto – it will barely be read by anyone, but since anything interesting or new published in it could be subject to a media storm, it is deliberately meaningless and does not outline Labour’s plan for government. While Labour made much hay in early April claiming that the Tories would rather raise VAT than National Insurance, Miliband refused to confirm that Labour would not in fact be raising both. The manifesto also says nothing about cuts except that they will be able to save billions in ‘efficiency savings’. Vague talk of tight means hides the reality that Labour is going to cut £38 billion from public services.

The last issue of *Solidarity* carried a front page headline “Tories plan cuts war” and “Unions should force Labour to scrap cuts plans”. The words ‘Tories’ and ‘Labour’ could easily have been reversed.

The cuts, no matter what party puts them into effect, can only be defeated by mass mobilisation including strikes and a political struggle against the cuts agenda. It is the central leaders of government, not members of affiliated unions, who decide Labour Party policy: they will only decide against cuts if they are unable to enforce them as a result of external pressure.

As one letter in *Socialist Review* described, various Trotskyist groups’ call for a Labour vote and continued union funding for Labour flies in the face of reality: “Holding your nose” while voting Labour is not an option. It is the same approach that Labour politicians have used during their misuse of power and that Gordon Brown will use if he wins the election. “I do not want to make cuts, I support working people; but do not worry, I will ‘hold my nose’ while I wield the axe.” It is the same hypocritical argument.” It is, moreover, a repudiation of arguments common on the left in the last few years that Labour had ceased to be any sort of vehicle for working class representation, to the extent that it ever had.

But there is nothing the Labour Party could have done over the last 13 years which would have denied them the support of the bulk of the unions, and even the radical left, on polling day 2010. They support Labour because they are not the Tories, and use Lenin quotes from ninety years ago to give this support for Gordon Brown a ‘Marxist’ gloss. Cuts, privatisation and war were the hallmark of the Blairite project, and ‘Blair-plus’ looks to be more of the same. The worst outrages of a Labour fourth term are not outlined in *A future fair for all*: but even the party’s best face is unpalatable.

# flying the flag for socialism in scotland

by Ewan Robertson

SSP candidate in Aberdeen North

I am a postgraduate student at Aberdeen University (MLitt Latin American Studies), and I am a member of the Scottish Socialist Party and Republican Communist Network, and an active supporter of the Tripping up Trump campaign.

In this short piece I’d like to explain firstly, what the approach of the SSP is to the 2010 General Election and how we have a fundamentally different approach to the election than the other parties, and secondly, why in my view it is useful to stand in elections in general.

The SSP’s approach to this election is fundamentally different from the other parties on a number of counts. These issues also highlight why the General Election is the most important we have seen in many years. For me the SSP’s most important argument is that the planned cuts in public spending and the attack on the remaining vestiges of the welfare state in order to pay for the budget deficit is not a necessity, but rather represents an attempt to make ordinary workers, students and pensioners pay for an economic crisis created by capitalism, particularly the bosses and the banking sector. In this process this highlights the class nature of the cuts.

Instead, the SSP is advocating that the bosses and bankers should be made to pay for their own economic crisis though high corporation tax and overall by ‘taxing the rich’. The only cuts the SSP advocates are scrapping Trident and reducing defence spending, and all of this money would be used to prevent ordinary people paying for the crisis.

This links to the second difference between the SSP and the other parties, which is to argue, as we have done since 2001, for an end to the occupation of Afghanistan and to bring the troops home. In the process to pointing to the illegal, destructive, immoral and detrimental aspects of the



*rejecting the lifestyle of career politicians*

occupation for both Afghans and ordinary Britons, the SSP also highlights the imperialistic nature of the war and the class interests which support it.

Finally, the SSP has as a policy, as happened with its MSP’s between 1999-2007, that its representatives will be workers’ representatives on workers’ wage. Any elected SSP representative only takes the salary of a skilled worker, and the rest is donated back to the party and to other socialist causes.

This is in stark contrast to the other parties whose ranks are filled with career politicians, many of whom are in the political game for what they can get out of it, as was highlighted by the expenses fiasco. Taken together, these issues show the difference between the four main capitalist parties in Scotland, and the socialist, pluralist and democratic nature of the SSP.

The other issue to deal with is on why the SSP should stand for election in general, something which the SSP has debated internally. Personally, my reasons are as follows. First, an election is a time of heightened political awareness in which through standing and campaigning it is possible to

get a socialist message out to a wider audience than normally is possible.

However, this should be about putting forward arguments for socialism and building our party, or as my father Iain Robertson (also an RCN member) has said ‘the votes should chase the politics, rather than the politics chasing the votes’, i.e. we should avoid populism for the sake of a few more votes over drawing in new, principled activists.

Secondly, if anyone is elected, it should be very clear that the SSP is a socialist movement rather than an electoralist party seeking eventual acceptance within existing state structures. SSP representatives should introduce legislation which will lift people out of the daily grind of poverty, linking this to a wider socialist agenda, and can argue for and support what the wider party is doing outside of parliament.

Representatives do also bring media attention and money which, although many caveats exist, can be essential to building a broad, mass movement. However, the power of the party should remain firmly within its activists and democratic structures, not with parliamentary representatives. This is partly why keeping representatives on a workers wage is so important, keeping their feet firmly grounded within the movement. As James Connolly said, the point of a socialist movement ‘is to rise with your class, not out of it.’

Therefore in these elections my personal aim is to attract new socialists to the SSP in Aberdeen, helping to build the party into a durable force for socialism in coming years, and to gain a wider audience for socialist arguments and ideas, particularly on the class nature of the cuts, rather than seeking to get as many votes as possible through populist slogans and personality politics.

★This article was written by Ewan Robertson, RCN member and SSP candidate in Aberdeen North. It is endorsed by Angela Gorrie, RCN member and SSP candidate in Dundee East.



# anna walentynowicz: an inspiring class fighter

by Chris Ford

Alongside the Polish elite who died in the Smolensk air crash on 10th April was someone whose passing marks a sad moment in the history of the workers' movement, Anna Walentynowicz.

Whilst the bourgeois media are marking her death as another opportunity to portray her life as part of the 'fall of communism' and a vindication of capitalism, this is not how Walentynowicz should be remembered. She was a true working class heroine: if this class fighter had lived in the West her obituaries would be pure vilification, portraying her as someone from a bygone age.

Walentynowicz was born in 1929 in Western Ukraine: she was orphaned during the Second World War and joined the Polish Workers' Party, the communist party, as a young woman.

A communist activist, she began work as a welder at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk in 1950 and was given the award 'Heroine of Socialist Labour'. But Anna's enthusiasm for the ideals of a genuinely communist society soon came into conflict with the reality of the corrupt, oppressive and exploitative rulers of the Polish People's Republic.

In 1970 she was an organiser of the workers' strike wave which saw 200 workers killed. In 1978 she was part of the Committee of Free Trade Unions of the Baltic and editor of the illegal *Coastal Worker*. In 1980, just before her retirement, the management decided to sack the respected militant crane-driver.

The Lenin Shipyards exploded and she became a central figure in the August revolution which gave birth to the ten-million strong trade union Solidarnosc. This was a model of workers' democracy which declared 'full support for the social movement for workers' self-management'.

However, Walentynowicz came into conflict with the vacillations of some leaders, who were adhering to a 'self-limiting revolution'. In December 1981 Martial Law was declared and Solidarnosc was forced underground and fragmented. Eventually the clique around Walesa assumed power as a Temporary Coordinating Committee and with western support held onto it. They abandoned the ideals of 1980 for a free market economy: close to the regime's own market orientation.

In May and August of 1988 there was a new strike wave demanding the legalisation of Solidarnosc and against the austerity policies. The old leaders around Walesa were found wanting, tied to their strategy of compromise with the regime, which came in 1989.

During the years of neo-liberal reforms in Poland Walentynowicz remained a critic of their effects on Polish workers and also of the continuing 'hagiography of Walesa'. She is immortalised in several movies, notably the powerful *Man of Iron* directed by Andrzej Wajda in which she plays herself. Just after the 1988 strike wave I had the privilege of conducting an interview with this truly inspiring class fighter, which is republished below:

## Interview with Anna Walentynowicz on the situation in Poland, August 1988

**CF. How do you assess the recent strikes (May) and what conclusions do you draw?**

**AW.** Solidarnosc wasn't prepared for such strikes. When it happened Solidarnosc in Nowa Huta [major steel plant in Krakow] took the initiative. Ex-leaders took matters into their hands. It was surprising the workers put forward the protection of health workers and those in education. I believed then it will be the beginning of the end and I hoped the country would take the initiative. It was not so. Support was not as great as expected.

The government attempted to exhaust them psychologically; they gave dates when pacification would take place. They used the moral authority of the church. At the request of the Episcopate three people came to negotiate. They came to soften the stance of the workers and there was a sharp exchange of opinions. The leaders of the occupation said they felt well, 'How can you feel well if the water is cut off in the canteen block'. Professor Stelmacka of Warsaw University left but Obzewski [a lawyer], he couldn't leave as I blocked the way.

'Why did you come here, don't you think they can talk for steelworkers (Solidarnosc leaders). Are the demands of the steelworkers beyond the competence of management'. During martial law these same people pressurised eleven Solidarnosc leaders to leave the country. Kornel Morawiecka



*walentynowicz supported class struggle, not liberal reformers in the regime, and warned of bureaucracy in solidarnosc*

[Leader of the militant organisation *Fighting Solidarnosc*] was pressurised by the same people when he left. Now they come to play the same role towards the steelworkers. I told the steelworkers who these people were and what they had done during Martial Law. The answer was that they have to give credit as they come on the behalf of the Episcopate. They set the workers thinking there would be no pacification the next day but talks.

“It is impossible to negotiate with the government we have. They don't respect their own agreements. We simply have to take what belongs to us. We shouldn't ask for negotiations”

It was a mistake. At 12:00-1.45 Anti Terrorist Units, dressed in bullet proof vests and armed with truncheons and bayonets on their backs moved in. Before they entered ZOMO [Paramilitary riot police] began beating their truncheons on their shields and then they used gas grenades. They told the men to lay down, others were made to kneel and sign agreements never to strike again. As a result of the pacification many were beaten unconscious. They were all taken to hospitals of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and nobody could visit them. Many were arrested; Giel, the strike leader, was handcuffed and threatened with ten years in prison. The steelworkers however, maintained a strong stance, they didn't stop protests.

Those arrested were fined in 48 hours. All had 81,000 Zloty fines. One of the workers paid and then met with the director of Nowa Huta. He wanted to leave the job. 'Don't, everyone will get the pay increase and nobody will be persecuted'. He wouldn't agree to work where people were beaten. Many workers were brought to break the strike and paid 7,000 Zloty a day. The workers didn't want to train them as they didn't know the plant at Katowice where they came from. The stance of the workers was that everyone be released and Giel not tried. He was released.

**CF. Workers also took action in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk and Ursus [tractor factory] in Warsaw. Why were they not successful in building a second front?**

**AW.** Solidarnosc was not prepared. They were never planned, in Gdansk 10% of the work force participated mainly young people. The demand was to legalise Solidarnosc only for the shipyard. The people didn't feel unified. They left after ten days. I think it was proper, even if they didn't achieve these demands. They showed they were ready and would fight. These were people who didn't participate in 1980. The government is afraid of this. (The people who made August 1980 were more or less not involved)

**CF. So what today is the result of this?**

**AW.** In Ursus there are also young people organising Bujak [A Solidarnosc leader] who "came from this factory and was a leader in 1980 wouldn't go to the strikers. He is a head of Mazowsze region. Bujak got some money from the Kennedy award and made his own private enterprise employing people who can't get work. This stops him from doing radical things or the government will interfere in business. The government has them in its hand.

The [leadership] should be elected but instead [the old leadership] choose themselves. This is against the Solidarnosc statutes, yet they are still at the top. Why do we have these leaders when they didn't call for strikes? Each factory fought independently, there was no coordination.

**CF. How do you view this process, since for example Bydgoszcz in 1981, of the Solidarnosc leadership distancing itself from the workers?**

**AW.** This distance between Solidarnosc and the workers is the major reason for my disagreement with Walesa. The Temporary Committee of Solidarnosc is something new. It is structured too much like the PZPR [Poland's ruling Communist Party]. They have privileges so the ideas of Solidarnosc have been dropped. During the seven years since Martial Law there have been no meetings with workers. They meet amongst themselves, on whose behalf?

In 1986 it was a surprise that such people as Bujak and Barusiewicz instead of calling a National Commission nominated themselves. The opposition surprised even the Government. At this moment they broke the statutes. In the fall of 1987 Solidarnosc members, including myself, during the pilgrimage to Czestohowa sent a petition to Walesa to call a National Commission meeting. But Walesa wouldn't accept it. So there have been no meetings, except amongst themselves.

**CF. What attempts are being made to rebuild the workers' organisations in the opposition?**

**AW.** Almost no attempts, the masses still trust the leaders who elected themselves. Youth like WiP [Freedom & Peace, a direct action movement] for example, are more effective in achieving their aims. It was they who replaced the military oath and it was they who took up ecological problems.

There is another way out, women. There is a huge army of women in inhuman conditions, for example in the textile industry in Lodz In 1971 after the pacification of the coast, women in Lodz demonstrated against the price increases. At the coast, which was so bloodily suppressed nothing was achieved in comparison to Lodz. At my initiative a seminar in Gdansk took place entitled 'caring for Our Homeland'. There is great interest in the material of this seminar and there will be another in September. Maybe it will establish a womans' organisation. In this respect there will be a chance for women to organise something. They think we are too low to fight.

**CF. What kind of organisation do women in Poland need?**

**AW.** Not a Party, maybe a branch of Solidarnosc, a women's section. I see no chances in Solidarnosc as it is now. What faces Poland is plenty of conflicts. The youth will bring about conflicts which will create something new. Social pressure is needed.

**CF. What is your view of the struggle between the radical opposition and the Liberals?**

**AW.** The advisers live in different conditions from the workers and when they negotiate they believe they will benefit. It is impossible to negotiate with the government we have. They don't respect their own agreements. We simply have to take what belongs to us. We shouldn't ask for negotiations, there are international agreements which are binding for us.

**CF. What is your opinion of the Gorbachev's reforms programme, do you have hope it will bring benefits?**

**AW.** No hope, I am afraid.

**CF. What is your opinion of those in the opposition who have sympathy for Gorbachev?**

**AW.** We must be open in our opposition to Gorbachev. We can't go to the USSR, but we can organise solidarity protests with the opposition there and do whatever is possible.

## the collapse of the eastern bloc and after

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# communists and recomposition

by Ed Griffiths

Communist Corresponding Society

As dialecticians, we're supposed to relish contradiction—but this one seems rather bitter. On the one hand we have a capitalism that is now glaringly unable to make use of the productive forces it has set in motion. The picture in many fields is one of stagnation, even retreat; and information technology, one of the few areas where dramatic advances have indeed been made, is the very area where new developments have to be most blatantly cramped and restricted to make them fit inside outmoded institutions like profit and private property.

Capitalism is in decline, and it knows it: that's why the ideologists of the ruling class can no longer stump up any optimism for the future, and why the mass culture industry is obsessed with depicting the future in terms of degradation and misery. On the other hand, meanwhile, we have a political Left that hasn't been so marginalised since the 1880s. Decades of stunning defeat have left the proletarian movement—including its Marxist section—disoriented and close to despair, clinging grimly to 'sensible' minimum programmes that have less and less to say about today's world of capitalist decline.

Driven by the remorseless logic of the falling general rate of profit, the decline of capitalism plays itself out in everyday experience in the form of a grotesque and systematic squandering of human potential. Under these conditions, the Left's timid little lists of policies are ignored precisely because they are so transparently inadequate to the needs of the time. But the exceptional international resonance achieved by the empty slogan *Another world is possible* demonstrates the eagerness with which people are longing for a radical alternative. At this point, the most forgivable mistake Leftists could make would be to come across as starry-eyed Utopians; the least forgivable would be to continue seeming to underwrite the bourgeoisie's insistence that *There is no alternative*.

The alternative can only be communism, understood as Marx and Engels understood it: as the practical movement to establish a society in which there will be no private property, no production for exchange, no division between mental and manual labour, no classes, and no state.

Communism isn't the alternative because we'd like it to be—it's the alternative because that's the direction in which modern society is straining to develop. Production and distribution have been almost entirely socialised. The small private producer and even the independent retailer are now historical relics. In the most advanced sectors of the economy, it's rapidly becoming simple common sense that private property is a hindrance to progress. Mass unemployment (even in boom times) and the much-publicised 'end of the job for life' have eroded particularistic craft traditions: today's workers, who can never be sure what job (if any) they'll be doing this time next year, are confronted directly with their status as sellers of undifferentiated labour power. These changes define the revolutionary opportunities of our time. But they also oblige us to undertake a fundamental reconsideration of theories and strategies that were developed for another era.

The whole period that began in 1917 is over—and the 'political traditions' (a highly revealing turn of phrase) that emerged from it now belong to history. In fact, each Leftist 'tradition' interprets the theoretical legacy of Marxism in terms borrowed from Hollywood (or from the Vatican): everything always comes down to goodies versus baddies.

In any particular debate, one side has to be flawlessly 'correct' on all points—and the other can't even just be wrong, it must be deliberately Betraying The Revolution, and, conversely, it cannot be admitted that a favoured writer ever once made a mistake.

Ultimately each 'tradition' narrows down to a single individual, and theoretical 'work' then consists exclusively of reiterating the given leader's favourite catchphrases in an effort to catch one's current factional opponents misquoting the line. This method is the direct opposite of that practised by the founders of scientific socialism. No other branch of literature or science adopts it. It is incompatible with the most elementary grasp of historical materialism.

But cobbling bits and pieces of single issues together with bits and pieces of 'political traditions' into a sort of lowest-common-denominator Left unity is neither useful nor even possible. The only meaningful way forward is to develop a new synthesis—a conscious political expression of the actual need for communism. That will involve scrupulous analysis and difficult theoretical work. It will mean criticising the various 'traditions' we ourselves come from, and recog-

nising the insights contained in others. In the initial phases, our agitation and propaganda for communism will inevitably be somewhat abstract in character. Even this represents a colossal step forward; but the goal must be to work out a whole political programme that embodies and resonates with current experience, while also pointing forward to communism. Such a programme cannot be drafted in isolation—it can only arise from the real conditions of life of today's proletariat, and from the actual experience of class struggle.

The development of a new communist synthesis and a new proletarian politics is a massive task—one on which we are only just beginning. But awareness of the need for it is spreading. In ones and twos and small groups, Leftists are getting to grips with the task of understanding modern capitalist society and laying the foundations for a new synthesis. This tendency represents the main hope for serious Marxist politics in Britain. The Communist Corresponding Society (established in 2008), is one such small group. We claim no monopoly on truth—and no immunity to error. There are probably plenty of questions on which we are still burdened by uncriticised assumptions inherited from the various 'traditions' to which our members once belonged. And there are numerous other questions that we have barely managed to raise. At this stage that is unavoidable; and it is no great cause for alarm. The real danger facing the CCS and other such groups would be the temptation to lose our nerve—to retreat to our 'traditional' certainties, and ultimately to slump back into the theoretical and practical comfort zone of the existing Left.

It would be meaningless (and damaging) to pretend we were setting ourselves up as something called a political party. After literally dozens of attempts to form a new Communist Party, it's time to admit that the formula as we have it doesn't work. The CCS describes itself as a discussion and propaganda group—which we believe is the most appropriate organisational form for Marxists to adopt in today's Britain. In the medium term we expect to see the establishment of many other small groups of non-'traditional' Marxists: these groups will obviously come from different starting points, and we would resist any attempt to hammer them into a premature 'unity'. As our *Outline Manifesto* puts it, "Unity is not yet among the needs of the hour: clear-sightedness, boldness, and creativity are."

Instead we envisage a process of debate and thought that will pave the way for a loose confederation of groups and individuals engaged in Marxist discussion and agitation. That, in its turn, might create conditions under which it became meaningful to raise the question of founding a party.

Viewed from the perspective of the existing Left, this approach can only look like a kaleidoscopic alternation between dogmatic ultra-orthodoxy ('back to Marx!') and wild, unfettered revisionism ('ditch the traditions!'). But, in fact, the two moments are inseparably linked: they're simply the two sides of the necessary attempt to start from scratch. And, however unrealistic the objective of communism might seem (to the Left), the technical and economic prerequisites for it are falling into place and problem after problem now demands it. In campaigning for communism, we are cutting with the grain of world history. But imagining we could somehow roll capitalism back to an earlier, 'social democratic' phase of its own historical development—that genuinely would be unrealistic.

## for a league of communists

by Allan Armstrong

Republican Communist Network

From the range of contributions I have read in *The Commune*, and the comrades I have met, membership seems to include anarchists, libertarian Marxists, dissident Trotskyists, republican communists and trade union militants. The first question, many on the Left must be asking is – how on earth is this possible?

One answer I would give is that, whenever major class struggles arise, those throwing themselves into direct organising and support tend to come from this wide political range.

The idea that anarchists/socialists/communists should remain quite separate because of prior political positions, usually relating to long-past historical events, is not very helpful.

What is helpful is if people from different political traditions get involved in debates in a non-sectarian manner, and link their particular political convictions with the issues our class currently faces. This appears to me to be what The Commune has achieved very successfully so far.

Nor, are the contributions to *The Commune* on, for example, particular strikes, opposing fascism, supporting migrant

workers, the bland cheering on we usually get in *Socialist Worker*. Problems are confronted and real debates take place. There are also excellent longer, thought-provoking pieces like Sheila Cohen's piece on workers' councils in issue 12. This is an excellent combination.

More controversial issues are going to raise their heads – the current one seems to be whether or not to participate in the General Election and, if so, who to vote for. I don't think that anyone who writes for *The Commune* believes there is going to be any particular governmental outcome from this election that will be other than horrific for our class. Therefore, the key job is how do we organise to more effectively combat their attacks.

I happen to believe there is a case for limited and principled electoral intervention, but I have more in common with those anarchists who reject such activity, than with those who believe in the electoral road to socialism. The question is, whether, because I will be conducting some limited electoral work, those who reject this tactic, can still work with me and others over, for example, active support for worker's strikes, anti-cuts demonstrations and occupations, involvement in militant anti-fascism, etc.? For my part, and from my long experience, I don't have any problems with working with others with whom I may disagree, but who are actively supporting workers in struggle.

As a result of meeting people from The Commune, I have become involved in the Alberto Durango Defence Campaign. The Edinburgh picket of the Union Bank of Switzerland involved people from the IWW, SSP and even someone from the Right to Work Campaign (SWP front). However, a real debate is taking place in the wider campaign over whether migrant workers experiencing attempts to marginalise and active sabotage their efforts by trade union officials should organise independently. For example, the possibility of joining and forming a branch of the IWW has been suggested.

This offers a challenge to two old doctrinaire stances – those official and dissident communists (largely Trotskyists) who say you should never leave the organisations of labour; and those anarcho-syndicalists who want to maintain their union as an anarchist organisation, as much as any official and dissident communists want to maintain their own 'parties'. The fact that discussions over dual membership with TUC-affiliated unions have taken place in the IWW (and dual membership with ICTU-affiliated unions is part of the agreed set-up in the Independent Workers Union in Ireland), shows that by applying some independent thought and tactical acumen it may be possible to overcome previous doctrinaire stances, in a manner which might help our class. This is a key role I see for The Commune.

In terms of communist organisation, The Commune appears to me to be at the stage of an early political organisation with several precedents – that of a corresponding society. It informs members, supporters and a wider group of people who are interested in key struggles, it provides a debating forum, and links its activities with an openly declared commitment to a communist future. Furthermore, its ambitions are international.

The current debate on organisation appears to be on how do we go beyond the present communist correspondence stage. I would argue that the apparent debate, on whether to party or not to party, is not addressing the situation we actually face. Something that has been overlooked in the discussions is the political platform on the back page of *The Commune*. This is quite an advanced political statement,, much more so than the What We Stand For statements of organisations like the SWP.

This statement already goes considerably beyond what would be required for a corresponding society. Yet a wide range of people have been able to join up to The Commune, myself included, on the basis of this principled political statement. Nobody has suggested amending it.

It would seem to me therefore, that we already have the political basis for a move forward towards a communist league. What is the difference between this and a corresponding society? Instead of The Commune's activity just representing the sum of the activities of its individual members, there would be active discussion on what joint activities we should be involved, and how best to promote and coordinate these. There would be more structured debate on what we mean by communism. The purpose behind this debate should be to lift all members to a new higher level of understanding, and not just the tired old sectarian debates about which organisation (or even individual) already has the perfectly formed position.

I am quite hopeful that, despite the difficult times we currently face, we are already seeing the beginnings of a real alternative. I would very much like The Commune to be part of that wider alternative. If there is something that contributes to such a feeling more than anything else, it is a deeply shared sense of comradeship. This means seeing openly acknowledged differences as a chance to raise the level of debate, and potentially produce higher levels of unity in the near future.



# political platform of our communist network

## 1. Our Politics

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

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

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

We are the most consistent advocates of social liberation in all its forms. We fight sexual repression, sexism and homophobia and advocate sexual liberation; we champion anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles; we oppose all limits to freedom of speech and free cultural expression. These struggles are not just some adjunct to working-class struggle but are the cornerstone of democracy and human freedom. We know that it is impossible for the working class to fight for and create a communist society if it is unable to control its own organisations: we support rank and file movements against the bureaucrats who lord it over the unions and parties of the left; we are for openness and democracy in the workers' movement.

We have no gods, not even revolutionary ones. We reject the practice of using the works of this or that socialist of decades past as sacred texts from which "revealed truths" can be read off as gospel. The "traditions" to which the traditional left groups appeal are universally ahistorical and anachronistic, used for the sake of feigning historical legitimacy rather than to critically examine and draw lessons from the past. We believe that the defeats of the workers' movement in the last three decades; the decay of the left and the absolute poverty of its ideas and slogans; its aban-

donment of class politics; and the sectarianism of the groups vying for supremacy with their own front campaigns and so-called unity projects; are all evidence of the need for ground-up rethinking of the left's project and the re-composition of the workers' movement.

## 2. Our Organisation

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

Communist revolutions cannot succeed without mass self-organisations of workers, and the leadership of organisations of revolutionary workers and the oppressed. We are a network whose aim is to contribute to the development of such a movement in this country and internationally. We agree to establish ourselves as an organising committee of individual supporters.

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

## 3. Membership

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

## 4. A pluralist communist network

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

# upcoming events

★London: The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital. We have our own organising meetings in London as well as 'uncaptive minds' public forums.

The next forum is a discussion on whether we should vote in the General Election. From 7pm on Monday 3rd May at the Artillery Arms, 102 Bunhill Row, near Old Street.

Join our email announcements list at <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommune-london>, or phone David on 07595 245494 for more info

★Bristol: we are running a reading group series on "Alternatives to capitalism". The next such meeting, on the Soviet Union, will be held from 6pm on Sunday 25th April at Cafe Kino, Ninetree Hill, Bristol. See the advert on our website for suggested reading.

★Sheffield: come to the monthly communist discussion forums. See website or call Barry on 07543 652629

We will have a stall at Saturday 22nd May's Anarchist Bookfair and from 2:30pm will host a session on 'communism from below'. The event is at Corporation night club from 10am-4pm: see [www.bookfair.co.uk](http://www.bookfair.co.uk)

★North-West: the next Manchester Class Struggle Forum is a discussion on internationalism: 7pm on Thursday 29th April at Friends Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS. For details contact Mark on 07976 386737.

★Edinburgh: we are holding a Global Commune day school on Saturday 22nd May. Discussions on priorities after the election, how communists should organise and internationalism from below. From 10:30am-4pm on Saturday 22nd May at Out of the Blue, Dalmeny Street (off Leith Walk)

★West Midlands: call Dave on 02476 450027

★Wrexham: contact Steve at [red-lantern21@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:red-lantern21@yahoo.co.uk)

**thecommune.co.uk**  
[uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com)

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