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only solidarity can stop their attacks

editorial of *The Commune*

The General Election did not provide the ruling class with a mandate to slash public services. In the Prime Ministerial TV debates the party leaders shied away from outlining plans for cuts, knowing that doing so would risk electoral disaster. The result of the election was itself inconclusive.

Yet the new coalition government is confident in its offensive against the working class. As David Cameron arrived in Number 10 on 11th May, he announced that Tory-Lib Dem Britain would be one where "we do not just ask 'what are my entitlements?', but 'what are my responsibilities?'". This masks an ideological war against our living standards.

The coalition was agreed after days of backroom negotiations between parties, the farce of parliamentary democracy. Whether haggling over cabinet posts or electoral reform, the only question for the Tories, Lib Dem and Labour elites was how to share power among themselves. A handful of individuals are able to determine the whole political agenda for the next five years.

This horse-trading was dressed up in much rhetoric about "the national interest": the capitalist parties agreeing to compromise in order to ensure a "strong and stable" government. The coalition government is a necessary weapon for the capitalist class, a weapon it can use to attack working-class living standards decisively and without hesitation.

Labourism

Our rulers know there will be resistance to their attacks. Indeed, Gordon Brown stood in the election on a programme of gradual and partial cuts, knowing it would be easier to impose such attacks with little trade union response. Millions voted Labour believing this would help avert the cuts, which is why their heartlands vote held up so strongly.

Indeed in opposition Labour will protest against how the cuts are targeted and how quickly they are implemented, even though they would merely have organised a different timetable for the same attacks. We see this in the social democratic government imposing austerity measures in Greece.

Many in the workers' movement will take a similar Labourite stand. They will complain that their jobs should not be the ones to be cut, defending their sectional interest while accepting that the cuts have to happen.



class solidarity: we can't fight them one trade union at a time

Already in the recent Royal Mail and British Airways disputes union leaders accepted the need for 'modernisation' but complained that they were not suitably consulted over where the cuts axe should fall. The Unite union even outlined 'alternative' plans for BA cuts, muddying the waters of what they were striking over and therefore losing any hope of public support.

There will be a deafening clamour from most trade unions to kick out the Tories – in favour of a renewed Labour administration.

They will say cuts, yes, but not in my back yard. Cuts, yes, but only for migrant and casual workers. They will cry "no to Tory cuts" when Labour would have done little different. This has its own logic: their bureaucratic and sectional means of organising reflect their end goal, electing a supposedly benign Labour government.

There will be those on the radical left who adopt similar positions, cheerleading union leaders whatever their failings and looking to use workplace disputes to build their party fronts and electoral campaigns. This approach also limits itself to short-termism, mere anti-Toryism and rigid separation between political and industrial struggles.

Communism

As against this, we must set our sights higher. Neither the fight against the new government, nor the wider and long-term interests of our class, will be solved by more of the same old Labourism. Instead we should work today on the basis of the communist social relations we want to create in the future. Some on the left may find it embarrassing to say they are for communism. But it is impossible to challenge the capitalist consensus that 'there is no alternative' without being prepared to say what that alternative might be.

In the coming battles we should uphold a set of principles of organisation which also

point to the communist society we want to create. We should demand what we need, not what our rulers can afford to give us; our struggles should be organised in an open, inclusive and democratic manner, uniting workers and service users; we should not put our faith in leaders and benign bureaucrats, but in our collective strength; and we must place the most vulnerable workers, such as immigrants and casual staff, at the heart of our struggles.

Solidarity is not an optional extra, but the only means by which to avoid the ruling class picking off each group of workers one-by-one. They have built their coalition, it's time to build ours.

what do the cuts mean?

The Tories want to erase a deficit of almost £180 billion. According to the *Financial Times*, to cut £30-40 billion the government would have to implement every last one of the following measures:

"a 5 per cent cut in public sector pay; freezing benefits for a year; means-testing child benefit; abolishing winter fuel payments and free television licences; reducing prison numbers by a quarter; axing the two planned aircraft carriers; withdrawing free bus passes for pensioners; delaying Cross-rail for three years; halving roads maintenance; stopping school building; halving the spending on teaching assistants and NHS dentistry; and cutting funding to Scotland and Wales by 10 per cent."

Perhaps they will not take exactly these measures: but it gives an idea of the kind of cuts to come.

middlesex university occupied

by Nathan Coombs

At the end of April Middlesex University announced plans to close its philosophy department—home to the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy and the base for the publication of the journal *Radical Philosophy*.

The news has been greeted by widespread dismay and letters of protest from around the world, including by such academic, left-wing luminaries as Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou.

The students decided to take matters into their own hands. They formed a protest group centred around a blog (savemdxphil.com) and a Facebook group 'Save Middlesex Philosophy'.

The Dean of Arts, Ed Esche, was supposed to meet the students on 4th May to discuss the closure, but after Esche put in a no show, the students took over the Dean's boardroom.

The spontaneous action escalated into an occupation after a lengthy democratic procedure involving many students who had never been involved in similar actions before. Initial nervousness and uncertainty gave way to an increasing radicalism and determination as collective discussion wore on.

Attempts by the security to use the police to evict the protesters quickly fell flat. The next day, a planned philosophy party in the same building was cancelled by management using a health and safety technicality.

However, about 80 protesters gathered outside the building, and after a rally they stormed the building. Very quickly the building was barricaded and a single room occupation turned into an occupation of the entire building.

Another meeting of the occupiers in the evening resolved to turn the occupied building into a site for arts, philosophy and cultural events, which they named a Transversal Space.

At the time of writing the occupation is still holding strong one week on, with still no word from management. The boldness and commitment of the student occupiers is to be applauded. With no support whatsoever from the Students Union and no formal institutional backing they have already demonstrated what can still be done in such circumstances.

To visit the occupied Mansion House, and to view a program of events in the Transversal Space, visit their website at: www.savemdxphil.com

gains from UBS cleaners' dispute

by Chris Kane

The cleaners' struggle at Swiss bank UBS has extracted some significant concessions from the bosses, thanks to a determined campaign.

As reported in previous issues of *The Commune*, in February UBS switched to cut-price contractor Lancaster, effectively meaning a 10.75% pay cut for cleaning staff in its City of London offices. When the immigrant workforce protested this injustice, their elected shop steward Alberto Durango was fired by Lancaster in a blatant act of victimisation.

Legally speaking, UBS switching contractor ought not to have affected the workers' conditions, but in reality they bulldozed through the changes. What they did not count on was the workers' resistance. For almost three months low paid migrant cleaners challenged Europe's second biggest bank, refusing to turn up for their new shift patterns or to sign the new contracts.

Moreover, in spite of the total lack of support for the cleaners from the Unite union, there was a vibrant and broad solidarity campaign from other quarters. Four lively protests outside UBS's HQ at London's Liverpool Street attracted as many as a hundred people, with loud chanting and militant speeches. The demonstrations involved workers across trade union divides, from cleaners to builders and teachers. There were protests across the world, from Edinburgh to New York and from Kyiv to Buenos Aires.

The resilience of the workers, and the solidarity initiatives, went some way to embarrassing the bank and its hiring Lancaster into a settlement. The concessions first filtered through around the time of the 23rd April London protest, although the details are still subject to a legal embargo. We hope to be able to publish more information shortly.

Coming out of this phase of the campaign at UBS we can consider that there have been some significant achievements, including the organisation of the dispute itself. Since Unite's effective abandonment of the Justice for Cleaners campaign it has been difficult for migrant cleaners to fight back against attacks on conditions, as displayed in the Willis and SOAS cleaners' disputes in 2009, both of which ended in defeat. As the recent deportation of a cleaner at another UBS office shows, the employers, their state and the borders regime still have very powerful weapons against us.

Despite the difficulty of workplace organising in the face of Unite's refusal to take action, the UBS campaign means a new type of organisation. A cleaners' branch of the IWW union is being established so that these workers can have both legal protections and their own autonomous organisation, and not need the permission of full time officials.

Moreover, the Cleaners' Defence Committee set up to organise solidarity protests has proven successful in pulling together diverse forces around a radical cause – the intransigent defence of much-stigmatised migrant workers.

We can take heart from the UBS campaign, and the defiance of migrant cleaners and their allies who proved that it is possible to resist even the most powerful employers.

racist anti-immigrant law passed in arizona

★ A report on the situation in the United States as Arizona passes a law allowing the arbitrary arrest of immigrants

by Kasandra Dalton

In late April the state legislature in Arizona and the Republican governor Jan Brewer signed the anti-immigrant law SB 1070. This is essentially a racist law to criminalise immigration and creates the legal power for police to arrest people upon mere suspicion of illegal immigration status.

There has been significant political fallout from this quasi-fascist decision on the part of the Arizona Republicans. Even Barack Obama, Mexican president Felipe Calderón, the Bishop of Los Angeles and Shakira have protested and made their views public.

But to me, from a Marxist perspective there seem to be two main points: make some comments on the sociological aspects of Hispanic immigration in the United States, and then to try and look into some of the characteristics of the political and economic situation in the USA which provide the basis for this racist and discriminatory law.

The sociology of the situation is central. This is because the very identity of the United States – always contradictory and in tensión – appears to be heading towards an ever more irresolvable contradiction. The coasts, east and west, have become multicultural, with the monolingual, white, pro-capitalist Christian population in the minority compared to a proliferation of people from different backgrounds from all over the world and very different value systems. This section of the population largely votes Democrat, but this appears not to be out of political conviction as much as a default choice given the other visible alternatives on offer.

On the other side of the spectrum is the middle and south of the country, where there is a greater concentration of the aforementioned conservative population. This section of society believes itself to be the direct embodiment of the “national spirit”, with a more conservative Christianity of Anglo-Saxon stock and a belief in utilitarianism and capitalist enterprise, and overwhelmingly votes Republican. Indeed, the racist anti-immigrant legislation passed by the Arizona senate is a product of this consciousness.

Translating this schema onto the class structure of American society is not straightforward and cannot be done simply. This is because among both sections of society there is a working class, a petty-bourgeoisie and the boss class proper. An important element in the recent right-wing radicalisation (the ‘Tea Parties’) has been sections of the petty bourgeoisie harshly affected by the crisis and ensuing unemployment and declining living standards.

So we can understand various factors behind the Arizona legislation. One of them has direct relation to the ideological fetishes of the grassroots of the Republican Party, xenophobic and looking to stigmatise ‘the other’.



1st may saw protests demanding the regularisation of undocumented migrants

Moreover we must consider the profound problems of the Arizona economy, particularly in terms of the service sector, and its direct consequence, the lack of jobs and thus the belief that the immigrant is a potential competitor for work. This is exacerbated by the inconsistent attitude of Barack Obama to migration reform that would really guarantee legal stability for the millions of undocumented migrants.

The law has already been challenged by various NGOs and the Democrats in the Senate have announced plans to annul the state legislation, based on the argument that states have no legal authority to promulgate immigration law.

1st May demonstrations

After the passing of the law, there were various demonstrations including that of the 1st May, International Workers' Day. Significant contingents of legal and undocumented immigrants marched and held large rallies in different parts of the country, from Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas and Milwaukee to smaller demonstrations in many other places.

This creates the impression that within the territory of the United States the immigrant section of the working class is creating its own tradition, based on the events occurring here which have historically been buried by imperialist ideology.

However, these mobilisations have still not had a major impact and there still lacks any political organisation able to pull them together and lead them from a purely sectional struggle towards a political and economic one.

However, far from saying that the matter is finished, this must pose revolutionary questions in two senses. Firstly, the possibility of mass mobilisations, like we saw on 1st May 2006 immigrant strike, where a million mostly Latino migrants took to the streets. Second, the need to continue analysing and acting on the ever deeper contradictions of capitalism and imperialism in the United States.

please, stop deceiving our community

★ A Colombian lawyer in London picks apart the calls for an ‘amnesty’ for illegal immigrants, as advanced before the election by the Liberal Democrats

by Miguel Puerto

These parties – all of them – have passed laws and directives in the House of Commons and European Parliament to hunt down and punish immigrants ‘without papers’, holding back and closing the door on legal immigration and thus denying the existence of political refugees.

These parties have approved and imposed the ignominious “Return Directive”, a legal process now fully in place across Europe and designed to help prosecute undocumented immigrants and punish them by putting them in prison for up to 18 months. This, only for the ‘crime’ (in quotation marks, yes, for it is not a crime) of the administrative failing of remaining in this country without documents. Standing against this must be the first rule of defending and protecting the dignity of our community, thus the title of this note – please, stop deceiving our community!

No political party is in favour of a meaningful regularisation in the interests of undocumented immigrants. If you take the trouble to look through the manifestos of these parties, you

will find that all are opposed to such a regularisation in favour of those millions of immigrants who continue to hope for an opportunity to legalise their status in this country. The Liberal Democrats have dug up an old proposal already previously advanced by organisations like ‘London Citizens’, and falsely portrayed as an ‘amnesty’. The first thing that must be said on this score is that such a proposal, as they present it, is not an amnesty for immigrants of irregular status, yet the word ‘amnesty’ implies a right all should enjoy, and from which all undocumented migrants in this country should benefit from.

The Liberal Democrats’ proposal says that it would benefit those undocumented immigrants who have lived in this country for more than ten years, ignoring the reality that immigration is a growing phenomenon whereby every day hundreds of immigrants clandestinely reach Britain through all sorts of means.

But what perhaps most fundamentally breaks with the criteria of a real amnesty is the demand that the immigrant should have no criminal record. As the Liberal Democrats must know (for they voted for these laws) after the shocking terrorist attacks on the London Underground a few years ago, holding and using a false passport is categorised as a

serious crime. The crushing majority of undocumented immigrants have false passports in order to get by in this country, and as such this majority would not qualify for the Liberal Democrats’ so-called ‘amnesty’. Only a small number of immigrants could apply for the ‘amnesty’: those who have never presented a false passport in order to get a job.

Moreover, the reality of immigrant life demands working long hours: thus many have never been to college to study the language, and if they did try they may well be refused on account of not having a legal status here. So even these few undocumented workers would not be able to benefit from the ‘amnesty’ either, because they do not speak the language, which is another filter in the Liberal Democrat proposal.

So in conclusion we would be in the same situation: but sadly with the aggravating factor that, deceived and full of faith, when many of our ‘convinced’ immigrants present their applications for regularisation the response will be immediate deportation. When this happens, I am sure these self-appointed ‘leaders’ will be nowhere to be seen: but today, I repeat, they are deceiving our community, selling them to the highest bidder in search of votes.

who votes for the BNP?

by Oisín Mac Giollamóir

The standard media portrayal of a BNP voter is of a poor, unskilled to semi-skilled white worker, who used to vote Labour, is worried about rising crime, unemployment and the rise in immigration. But is this really who votes BNP? Two recent studies suggest otherwise.

According to the BNP itself, the primary reason for its growing support is that the political elite is out of touch with working class people's real concerns about immigration. A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research published last month finds little evidence for this. Indeed the report finds that higher immigration *lowers* the vote for the BNP. Likewise, the higher the number of non-white people in an area, the less likely people were to vote BNP. (The one and only exception to this was in Barking and Dagenham.) Intuitively, we can understand why this is the case. The more interaction people have with migrant groups the less concerned about immigration they are.

Another finding of the study was that crime and unemployment seemed to have little to no effect on support for the BNP, and what little evidence there was suggested that higher crime rates and higher unemployment led to lower BNP votes.

A slightly older study, 'The BNP: The roots of its appeal' (2006), by researchers in the University of Essex looked at BNP support in the 2004 European elections. They interviewed people coming out of polling stations and found that 'it is the lower middle classes [sic], C1s and C2s, who vote for the far right'. After this the next largest BNP voter demographic was the unskilled/manual working class. Very little support came from either the professional and managerial demographics. Most interestingly however, was that very little support came from the poorest demographic.

The same study also found that although the BNP was pulling support from all three parties, but the main voter swing was from the Conservatives and not Labour.

So if most of the simple reasons for BNP support have been dispelled, why are people voting BNP? The IPPR says "socioeconomic and political exclusion are the major factors at work." Not surprisingly, the IPPR find that where

less people think 'that their area is one where people from different backgrounds get along' they higher the BNP vote. They also find that areas with lower voter turnout show more BNP support. This finding is also supported by the 'The BNP: The roots of its appeal' report.

While some anarchists, such as this author, might occasionally like to think that declining voter turnout suggests that people are abandoning representative democracy and are about to stand up for themselves through direct action and self organisation, this need not be the case. Rather, declining voter turnout means little more than that people feel alienated, separated and unrepresented by mainstream party politics. There is no reason why people's experience of political exclusion should result in a revolutionary rather than a reactionary response.

Another strong finding of both reports is that the lower the average level of qualifications in an area, the higher the BNP vote. The standard reaction to this might be "ah people vote BNP because they aren't educated", and then draw the conclusion that the task of the left should then be to 'educate' BNP voters about how bad the BNP is.

The Essex report seems to tend in this direction. However, it is extremely unclear to me how an A level in Maths or a BSc in Engineering could make anyone less racist. The IPPR report gives a much clearer explanation of how and why people's level of qualifications matter. They point out that "people with higher qualifications have more options in the increasingly open, flexible and knowledge-based economy that we live in. While finding employment per se may not be central (as indicated by the finding that employment levels do not affect votes for the BNP), the quality of work people can access may be critical. Where people have lower levels of qualifications they seem increasingly likely to struggle to find good quality work that pays a living wage, which could make them feel excluded and vulnerable."

In sum the IPPR finds that "the evidence points to political and socio-economic exclusion as drivers of BNP support. In particular, areas with low average levels of qualifications (which can mean people struggle in today's flexible, knowledge-based economy), low levels of social cohesion, and low levels of voter turnout (indicating political disenchantment) are the ones that show more BNP support."

weak left results in scotland

by Allan Armstrong

In the absence of any credible alternative, most voters have accepted that the costs of the ongoing crisis are going to be borne on their shoulders, and that the only possible defence, is to ensure that more of the burden falls upon the shoulders of others.

Moreover, despite the 'Credit Crunch' in 2008, the left hasn't had the confidence to begin to articulate a genuine communist vision for an alternative society, rooted in the contradictions of actually existing capitalism. At best, it has proclaimed that 'Another World is Possible', but has remained decidedly vague on what this would look like. Instead it has clung on various aspects of outmoded mixed economy and state capitalism, which were once advocated by old-style social democrats and bureaucratic socialists.

When the 'Credit Crunch' broke out, many on the left thought that its time had arrived at last. Neo-liberalism was discredited. This left focussed on a possible revival the US 'New Deal' or Old Labour's Welfare State. However, without the left's prompting, neo-liberals themselves quickly adopted Keynesian measures, only to buttress their now shakey capitalism through massive banking bail-outs, and by increased military expenditure tied to permanent war.

So what of the Scottish Socialist Party's electoral intervention? There had been internal opposition to standing in the Westminster elections - some based on demoralisation after the split in 2006, some based on a Left nationalist preference for standing in Holyrood elections in 2011, and some others, more community focussed, wanting to concentrate on the local elections in 2012.

However, the SSP Conference in March overwhelmingly endorsed a limited electoral intervention (in 2005, the still united SSP had stood in all Westminster seats). Colin Fox, the National Co-spokesperson, emphasised his low voting expectations - no more than 1%. He asked the SSP to use the opportunity instead to draw existing members back into activity, create new branches and gain new members.

The four main issues raised in the SSP's election campaign were the need to oppose the massive public sector cuts (combined with support for workers in struggle, whether in BA, on the railways, or in the civil service); opposing the Afghan War by calling for the immediate withdrawal of troops; attacking parliamentary corruption (with an emphasis on a worker's MP on a worker's wage - as implemented by the 6 SSP MSPs between 2003-7); and the need for a democratic Scottish republic.

Ten candidates were eventually adopted, which allowed for an election broadcast.

Despite three national editions of *Scottish Socialist Voice* being produced, the ten campaigns were very much local affairs. Therefore members' response to the anticipated poor election results - ranging from 0.5% to 1.4% (an average of 316 votes) - has mirrored the nature of the local campaigns. Where the emphasis was on winning recruits for socialism, e.g. the new Aberdeen branch, there has been some optimism. Where there was a more populist and electoralist focus, there has been some demoralisation, with the resignation of an SSP candidate in Paisley.

Quite clearly, the division between the SSP and Solidarity added to the marginalisation of the left here. On paper, the SSP has a policy of trying to renew socialist unity by leaving the door open to Solidarity. In reality, a significant section of the SSP (including amongst the leadership), naively believe that the state will solve the left's problems by bringing Tommy Sheridan to account in court!

However, as the equally poor results of the Left elsewhere in the UK show (with the partial and ambiguous exceptions of left populist candidates such as Respect and Eamonn McCann, the SWP's 'People before Profit' candidate in Derry), something more than mere organisational unity is needed. The left has first to decide exactly what it means by a 'socialist alternative', and then to begin serious discussions on how to link this with raising the political sights of those who will inevitably be drawn into struggle, as the bosses' austerity programme takes its toll.

anti-fascism and the BNP in the 2010 election

by Glyn Harries

At the May 2010 Barking and Dagenham council elections, the BNP lost all their 12 Councillors, all previously elected in 2006. And their national party leader Nick Griffin, who it was suggested would take the Parliamentary seat, only came 3rd, and petulantly walked away declaring Barking and London 'finished'.

But away from the headlines the actual results in Barking and Dagenham show the BNP nearly doubled their vote from 2006 to 2010, though where they had stood previously their vote did decline slightly. I have used their highest votes in each ward. While it is good news to see the Councillor parasites of the BNP wiped out, the Hope not Hate victory claims are as ever deeply flawed.

HnH (and to a lesser extent Unite Against Fascism) carried out a massive campaign in Barking and Dagenham. They argued there was a serious threat of a BNP breakthrough in Barking and for people to vote, but not vote BNP. In 2010 HnH put out nearly 250,000 leaflets into Barking and Dagenham: 130,000 in the last ten days, 90,000 put out by 540 people on the 'Day of Action' on 17th April, and another 25,000 in January and March.

But the idea that Griffin would win the seat was never likely. In 2005 Hodge got 13,800 on a 50% turnout, while the BNP got 4,900. And in the most relevant election since, the London Assembly of 2008, in those wards that make up the Barking constituency, the BNP only got around 6000. And while the BNP vote increased from 4,900 to 6,600, a massive increase, New Labour MP Margaret Hodge nearly doubled her vote to 24,600!

Second, it was always more likely that the general election race would be used by the BNP to get more Councillors. And this the BNP also failed in. While they increased their overall vote to a massive 15,000 and would have held many of their seats on a similar turnout to 2006, they were wiped out on a massive increase in the Labour vote, e.g. almost 100% in Valence ward between 2006 and 2010, mirroring the increase for Hodge.

So the HnH/UAF campaign essentially, and as always, relied on getting out the Labour vote, in this case for the ultra NuLabourite Margaret Hodge, the cause of most people voting BNP in the first case!

What does all this mean in terms of those who, after all the leafleting, after all the door knocking, after all the arguments that the BNP are a fascist party, still voted for the BNP in Barking and Dagenham? Are we to now believe that these voters are all fascists? There is a very real risk that by not providing any alternative and by continually marginalising those who will not tolerate the likes of Hodge we actually push those who would vote BNP as a protest into actually identifying with the BNP and actually starting to think fascism is an answer.

Indeed Nick Lowles the leader of HnH/Searchlight is well aware of this and after the Euro elections in 2009 wrote

"...Addressing the widespread economic insecurities, solving the democratic deficit and forging new progressive identities requires public policy changes that are beyond the remit of the Hope not Hate campaign and anti-fascism generally. We can mobilise the anti-BNP vote and even sometimes suppress the pro-BNP vote but we cannot build houses and reduce waiting lists; we cannot prevent undercutting of wages and the abuse of migrant workers. Local anti-fascist movements cannot get resources into communities, often the poorest, dealing with extraordinary levels of migration. That is the job of politicians and political parties. It is their failure currently to do so that is resulting in the increasing tribalism of local politics along racial and religious lines..."

But what Lowles writes is entirely contradictory and illustrates only too well why anti-fascism simply does not work. What is needed is a community based strategy, one that is class based, and addresses all the concerns of local people and does not get drawn into the far-right's and state's racialising and divisive politics.

To conclude we have another situation where superficially it appears that fascism has been defeated, but it has not. And it is worth also noting that nationally they will have got squeezed by the swing to the Tories (as in 1979). These pyrrhic HnH victories based on massive time and money inputs, do not defeat fascism, frustration and anger but merely hide them. And in fact may do worse. They may even, by tying what are seen as the Left to New Labour, break yet more links with the working class and progressive ideas.

greek revolt haunts the rulers of europe

by Mark Ellingsen

A class war has broken out in Greece, and there is a palpable fear amongst the international ruling class that workers will not submit to paying for the bailout of financial institutions. Stock markets tumbled during a week in which public and private sector workers in Greece went on strike and only recovered when the EU agreed an emergency fund to defend the euro. But even now doubts still linger amongst investors as to whether this will actually resolve the underlying problem of state debt.

The turmoil in Greece has seen protestors storm the Acropolis unfurling banners appealing to Europe to rise up; teachers interrupting an interview with the Education Minister on state television; and a general strike on 5th May with a demonstration of at least 100,000 in which some workers tried to storm the Greek parliament.

However, the strike was marred by the death of three bank staff who had been working inside a bank when it was petrol bombed. In protest at the deaths, bank workers went on strike the following day, but notably they also condemned the government for its austerity measures and declared their support for workers fighting back. In a worrying development for the government, 150 armed forces personnel staged a silent protest in Athens against having their bonuses cut.

This was the backdrop to the vote on a new round of austerity measures which the social-democratic PASOK government pushed through parliament. The measures included pay cuts, tax rises, the reduction in state pensions and a slashing of the minimum wage from 700 Euro a month to 560, as part of an attempt to reduce the budget deficit from 13.6% to just 3% by 2014. In return the EU and IMF have agreed to a £95bn package to help the Greek government pay its loans. Interestingly, most of the political elite across Europe were publicly blaming the government's debt problems on the profligacy of the Greek state.



the greek state has struggled to keep order faced with the power of the uprising

Greece's debt-to-GDP ratio is 115%, compared with Spain's which is just over 52%.

However, this belies the seriousness of the underlying global crisis which the political elite and ruling class understands only too well. The underpinning and nationalisation of private debt by the state as part of the bailout of financial institutions has merely shifted the problem. Rather than financial investors being concerned about the ability of private corporations to pay their debt, the concern is now focused on governments. Markets are now concerned about defaults on sovereign debt.

But underpinning government debt are the banks that stand to lose a lot of money yet again if governments fail to pay. It is this which underpins the fear that 'the contagion' drowns other countries including Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Ireland and possibly even the UK. Pretending that crisis has mainly been caused by previous Greek governments is a convenient way of politically masking the truth. However, national political elites are not united - witness German chancellor Merkel's fury at having to spend German state funds bailing out Greece.

Greece is at the leading edge of an economic and political hurricane which threatens to bring depression, the collapse of existing states and revolution. Somehow the political elite have to steer a course which avoids turning a recession into a depression, while at the same time saving private capital from itself by not only underpinning its debt but by guaranteeing a return on investment on financial capital.

If workers would only accept unemployment, poverty, broken homes, lack of health care and education then maybe capitalism can return to health. But this asking a lot, not only because workers stand to lose their livelihoods, but because of the unwritten agreement between the institutions of capital, labour and the state, which emerged in Europe after World War II, that workers would see the benefits of economic growth, by accepting capitalism and eschewing class war. This understanding was dented in the 1980s as industrial capital became less profitable: but today with the profitability crisis no closer to being resolved and now the instability of financial capital, this unwritten agreement is close to collapse. However, the ruling class is not a homogenous political or economic bloc and there are those who fear the consequences of a sharp turn to austerity and urge caution in cutting state expenditure, both for humanitarian reasons and because of the inevitable backlash from workers. But as the markets circle around governments their room for manoeuvre has dramatically narrowed.

Workers' actions are always an unwelcome intrusion into the comfortable relationship between the political elite and ruling class. Normally, this can be dealt with by a confident combination of repression and incentives. The strikes in Greece at a time of global economic turmoil have given rise to an anxiety amongst our rulers which hasn't been seen in a long time. It is certain that this struggle won't be the last and it is likely to spread to other European countries faced with similar state dept problems and the imposition of neo-liberal economic policies. As we went to press, the ADEDY and GESEE union federations had called for further demonstrations in central Athens and all other major Greek cities.

rank and file organising: it could happen here too

by Sheila Cohen

April 2010 saw the biggest conference ever for *Labor Notes*, the US-based rank and file trade union newsletter and network which celebrated its 30th birthday last year. Over 1200 activists gathered in the (unionised) hotel just outside Detroit where corporate blandness was set off by the T-shirted exuberance of American workers not shy of yelling a slogan or two – especially when workers on strike against a non-unionised branch of the same hotel chain came forward to tell a familiar story of rank injustice and betrayal.

It's impossible to take in everything at a *Labor Notes* conference (especially if you're jet-lagged) but I followed my main interests in attending a chain of workshops addressed to union organising and membership participation (or lack of it). The first of these – “Innovative Organising Strategies” – was if anything the most inspiring, featuring the crucial dynamics of organising a union “before the union came along”, as some US activists have put it.

In this case, it was one speaker in particular – a woman from the newly-formed Philadelphia Security Officers' Union – who symbolised the bold and impressive process of workers just organising “off the bat”. Here, super-exploited security guards employed by a contractor at the prestigious Philadelphia Museum of Art were combining in their own self-started union despite the contractor's refusal to recognise them and the absence of any institutional trade union support.

The same “union before the union” logic – though in this case *after* the union – recurred in the following day's session, “Can Members Really Run Their Unions?”. Angela Glasper, an African-American activist, inspired us with her retelling of how the dissident group now established as the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) had broken from the increasingly stifling embrace of the overmighty Service Employees' International Union (SEIU).

To one who has written of the deadly but in a sense inevitable virus of “institutionalisation” within trade unionism, the NUHW represents an ideal, if unsustainable picture of direct member-led democracy. The tendencies towards bureaucratisation so monstrously exhibited by the SEIU in, for example, its enormous “locals” (branches), which often cover an entire US state, are so far precluded by any kind of official institutional framework for the NUHW; due largely to lack of funds, all its organisers are volunteers. Angela was at pains to emphasise the unassuming approach of NUHW founder



labor notes conference brings together activists

Rosselli, who even among his keen supporters at *Labor Notes* tends to take a background role and let the union's workplace-based activists promote the new union “in the field”.

The future of NUHW is, so to speak, too close to call at the moment. But, as its dynamic spokesperson in this workshop put it, “Who knows what we're worth more than us? Yes, yes, yes! Rank and file members *can* run their union.” Emphasising the factor of membership involvement, she argued, “An educated rank and file member is a scary member for management.” Other speakers, from more conventional unions, were less “fired up”, and the traditional blame-the-member syndrome came into play. While a speaker from telecoms union CWA began with the rallying cry “Members are the warriors - if they don't know why they're fighting, they won't fight”, she also argued, “Members [will say] ‘Trade unions are not strong’. [Our response will be] ‘That's your fault!’ There has to be some way to go ahead and fix the apathy.”

Speakers from the floor raised similar points. In the vivid language of American activists (in this case an autoworker), “We went wide, but we didn't go deep. When it comes to needing the members – I turned round and no one was behind me...” “We got spanked. Because we didn't have depth on the ground.”

In fact membership “apathy” was a repeated theme (as in so many British discussions) so I followed my “thread” and attended a third workshop, “Beating Apathy”, directly on the subject. Here Dynnita Bryant from the Philadelphia Security Officers' Union was again inspiring in describing the growing confidence of her initially timid potential membership: “They wanted it, you could tell they wanted it...They finally realised that together, we can stand up. Single, we can't do

nothing.” While her wonderful directness had been modified by official union phraseology such as “narrative-based organising”, Bryant turned this postmodern discourse into her own uniquely vivid language: “We get them to put their issues on the table, tell their stories. Everyone's going to have a different self-interest, but that doesn't mean you can't work together.” The rationale of collective representation of individual interests could hardly be put better.

But it wasn't, of course, just the workshops. I've omitted the inspiring “banquet” on Saturday night, which raised over \$40,000 for *Labor Notes* (more usual amounts are around the \$25,000 mark) in a packed ballroom with delegate after delegate standing up to “pledge” amounts from \$1000 to \$5 – a bit like a church and not very British, but this time the “church” is a vibrant, inspiring movement featuring the self-selected cream of US activists.

The conference was studded with major sessions in which attendees packed the incongruously grand “ballroom” to be brought to their feet over and over by platform speakers who spoke of strikes across America and beyond, rank and file reform in huge, bureaucratic unions like the SEIU, the hope offered by a new left-wing leadership of the Transit [tube] Workers' Union in New York, the ongoing struggle of trucker activists in Teamsters for a Democratic Union to take back locals from the Hoffa dynasty, and in one case a fantastic poet rapping about Detroit:

“We're growing our organic *activists*
No propaganda and no *preservatives*
We're growing with the weeds and *cabbages*
Taking out the neo-*conservatives*” etc...

The young, multi-ethnic audience clapped, cheered and yelled the roof off – many first-time attendees previously unaware that there could be such a thing as a movement-wide gathering of workers who shared so many of their experiences. But they were there because, as *Labor Notes* co-founder Kim Moody agrees, LN has reached a critical mass – largely through its locally-based “Troublemakers' Schools” - whereby it has gained, so to speak, independent life in the wider labour movement.

To me, *Labor Notes* 2010 demonstrated yet again the enormous potential such rank-and-file networks can have, both in terms of union renewal and broader socialist politics. A *Labor Notes* conference certainly doesn't shove “socialism” down people's throats, but class is in the air. Why not here?

★see extended version online at thecommmune.co.uk

stop the demonisation of the unemployed

by Duncan Smith

Unemployment figures were up to 2.5 million by the end of March, and there's no reason to think they won't get any higher: some estimates put them as high as 3.3 million by the end of the year.

As well as rises in unemployment over the past few years, there have been increased attempts on the part of capital to project an image of criminality onto the unemployed, with high-level campaigns targeting "benefit thieves". Such campaigns have the basic effect of portraying the unemployed as lazy, scrounging criminals, in what seems like a more-or-less conscious campaign to undermine solidarity on the part of the rest of the working class.

For those lucky enough not to hang around in JobCentres, here's what you have to do to get your £64 a week (£100 if you're married). At first it's suprisingly relaxed: you go to reception, get waved through by two or three security guards, sit in a waiting area for ten minutes or so, before being called over to sign on and have a 'chat' with your advisor. You'll have been expected to fill in a jobsearch booklet, detailing all your efforts to find work. Your advisor will glance at it, and then you'll be free to go. I've been signing on for a while, and have never once had my jobsearch checked in any meaningful way. It can happen though, and if they find it 'unsatisfactory', or if you've failed to fill it in at all, then they can, and often do, stop your benefit for a fortnight.

Incidentally, the waiting areas can be great places to meet people. Last time I was signing, I got talking to someone. He was going off his head because they were going to stop his benefit, predictably enough because his jobsearch wasn't 'satisfactory'. The guy was pretty ill, and on heavy medication. He was terrified of becoming homeless. He was 65 years old. I eavesdropped on his interview when he was eventually called over. They gave him a week's grace, and they spoke to him like he was a five year old. A few years ago, he would have been on Disability Benefit, and would not have had to put with such harassment and condescension. But these days Disability Benefit is being phased out, and is almost impossible to get on.

When you've been signing on for three months things start getting to be a bit more serious. You'll probably be put on "intensive signing", which means you'll have to sign on weekly instead of fortnightly, and your advisor will look a little more closely at your jobsearch.

At further 'stages' in the process - you move up a stage every three months - you'll be given various 'offers'. Training courses, most of which are absolutely useless and are run by private companies, A4e being the most notorious example. These companies have zero knowledge of the issues facing the long-term unemployed, and the services they offer are completely useless in terms of getting any meaningful work. And things are set to get a lot worse. From October sections of the unemployed in Greater Manchester will be forced to take part in the proposed Work for Your Benefits scheme, where they will have to do full-time work whilst remaining on benefit money. Of course, with the new government, this may well change - but it's unlikely to change for the better.

All of this doesn't seem to be much more than a punishment system for those who for whatever reason can't get a job. Claimants are demoralised and patronised, and are certainly not offered any meaningful help. The training that you can do *outside* of the JobCentre system is severely limited by the cap that is placed on the number of hours you can do if you are not to lose your benefits. Voluntary work - which any sensible system would understand to be the *best* place to gain new skills - is limited to registered charities. In dark moments I almost think that ultimately the benefits system would like to force inactivity: if you're not actively seeking work, you shouldn't be doing anything at all.

Traditionally the unemployed have been used in capitalism as a reserve workforce, to instil fear and discipline into the working population. That's starting to change: we are increasingly portrayed as a criminal class to be feared and despised, entirely separate from the working class proper. Sometime in the last five years the term usually used for people who fiddle their benefits was changed from 'benefit cheat' to 'benefit thief'. The DWP website claims that "those who steal benefits are picking the pockets of law-abiding taxpayers. In 2008-9 benefit thieves stole an estimated £900 million from public funds, that's why we are determined to catch them". They don't mention that there's an



an ad campaign to intimidate claimants

estimated £10.5 *billion* saved in unclaimed benefits each year. Nor do they mention how reluctant the DWP are to explain precisely what benefits you are entitled to. And they certainly don't have anything to say about that pack of benefit thieves in Buckingham Palace, who with the Civil List have their very own, very high class benefits system.

On the Benefit Thief section of the DWP website, alongside the usual drivel about "hidden cameras and mobile surveillance", there is an online form for the enthusiastic Benefit Snitch to fill in. It is remarkably detailed: it wants to know the victim's NI number, their height, the colour of their eyes. It would be pretty funny if it wasn't ever so slightly sinister. Who are these snitches who know the colour of your eyes? Just like with terrorists, the honest taxpayer is expected to see benefit thieves *everywhere*, and to *dob them in* at every opportunity. Far from being a criminal class, the unemployed are actually a *scapegoat class*: one more example of capital's vicious tendency to set up the most vulnerable people in the country - migrant workers, asylum seekers, the ill, the 'insane', the list goes on - as hate figures.

Since Thatcher, and even more so since Blair, it is always automatically assumed that the unemployed quite simply don't want to work. Blair and Brown were always droning on about "benefit culture", about how a "life on the dole" would soon be impossible. They never say anything that since the all-out attacks on the industrial base in the 1980s there are massive areas of the country where work is quite simply *not there*, or that most of the "job creation" they talk about is either meaningless or illusory. It is worth repeating: *the jobs are not there*. The only sane response would be to accept that full employment is an impossibility, and to then start coughing up a decent amount of benefit money. And ultimately, an all-out critique of the entire ideology of work is necessary: of course, these demands are totally incompatible with capitalism.

The dole is essentially one of the front-line zones of capital, where we come face to face with the seething contempt that it holds for us. But we're not taking it lying down. One of the most exciting developments for the left over the last year has been the massive increase in Unemployed Workers' Unions throughout the country: groups have formed in Cambridge, Salford, Oxford, Sheffield and London. The Cambridge offices of A4e were picketed in January, and in March, London Coalition Against Poverty, the Disabled People's Direct Action Network and Feminist Fightback organised a week of action against the Welfare Reform Bill.

Claimants are only able to be scapegoated because the public don't know what the conditions for the unemployed actually are. The new campaigns can challenge this, and will lead to greater solidarity has between the unemployed and the wider movement. False images of the unemployed have to be challenged at every opportunity. Most important of all, Work for your Benefits, or whatever version of it Cameron decides to throw at us, must be treated in the same way that we treated the Poll Tax. Resistance to capitalism is slowly but surely increasing in intensity: the unemployed have a key role to play in the struggle.

the enigma of capital

by Sharon Borthwick

The Great Hall at King's College London was packed to capacity and beyond on 28th April upon the visit of Marxist geographer David Harvey. One could only wonder where all the numbers of the left attending academic conferences were the rest of the time.

How can we, maybe, capture and utilise the level of interest shown on these occasions? This particular audience was made up of SWPers and Kings College and other students. The usual papers were sold outside.

First to speak was someone from the *Capital* reading group at King's College. This was an intro full of optimism on how *Capital* reading groups were popping up all over and encouraging everyone to have a go as it was a great and not such an obscure text as people were led to believe. David Harvey's series of university lectures on *Capital* is a suitable beginning, possible to follow at davidharvey.org.

Then a first year student took the mike to speak about how the cuts were going to affect King's College with lecturers' jobs and courses under threat and how students had been supporting the staff. Later, after David Harvey had spoken, another student made mention of future student demos against the cuts to be held on 5th and 6th May.

David Harvey was pleased at the turnout and that there has been, as he sees it, a resurgent interest in the writings of Karl Marx generally; book sales are apparently up.

One couldn't help wondering how much universities spent on flying star academics in from the US and elsewhere - especially ones whose lectures are available online (this lecture too was filmed, so will no doubt show up on YouTube or elsewhere in the near future). But Harvey is a skilled teacher and managed to shed light over some of the difficult terrain of capital in the time. The book is more than likely worth putting on wish lists.

Harvey talked about capital in the context of the current crisis, explaining as did Marx, how capital is "path dependent", inevitably, inexorably, going from crisis to crisis, the fault built within the very system itself. Relevant to his geography discipline he roved worldwide for illustration. He explained that capitalism doesn't ever actually solve crises but moves them around; for instance the banking crisis becomes a country's crisis or more specifically the crisis of the working people of that country, as in Iceland and Greece.

Harvey is saying that this is how, so far, capitalism has stayed alive, shifting the problem now here, now there, and so to right now, where huge risks taken by private enterprises end up as public debt that is foisted upon the actual workers in terms of the cuts made to their jobs and services. Finance is privileged over absolutely all else shaping and controlling human relations as it does their environment.

Human happiness is bypassed in favour of eking out the, on average, 3% growth needed for reinvestment for future gain.

But it is getting harder and harder to find that 3%. In the 1970s, Harvey says, labour had become too powerful for the capitalists. The neo-liberal tendency came specifically to discipline the workers when interest rates were seen to be falling. The freewheeling markets after the neo-liberal style, led to many industries offshoring; and the workers truly were disciplined and their unions massively disempowered.

But workers' disempowerment eventually represents a new problem for the capitalist to overcome. When wages don't rise adequately as they haven't in recent years, where will the capitalist find a marketplace so to amass another filthy hoard? So this is when the whole thing becomes speculative, the imaginary market place is born - the credit card ringing in a new temporary dawn. The capitalists seek profits from those who haven't any 'real' wealth. Home ownership is sold as the ultimate road to dreamland.

But it really is a dream and there wasn't the capital there to really realise it. Hard slog alone was never going to be enough. Those with mortgages they couldn't afford lost their homes. Yet the banks are completely absolved and are even making ludicrous profits all over again as new imaginary markets are invented - derivatives from derivatives, carbon trading, futures markets.

As a communist David Harvey is for exposing clearly to everyone how capitalism works so that alternative systems will eventually be realised. Indeed, they must be realised as capitalism is surely on its very last legs seeking to make profits from absolutely nothing at all. Seems they really might try selling the air you breathe next.

constructing alliances to oppose public service cuts and privatisation

by Gregor Gall

There is an old anarchist saying: 'No matter who you vote for, the government still gets in'. The result of the 2010 general election puts a new complexion on this old saying for no matter which of the mainstream parties was elected to government, the result would lead to the same outcome in regard of cuts in public services and further privatisation of these.

In the election, three parties only differed on when, where and how much on these two central issues. The elephant in the room of the 2010 election was neo-liberalism. It was never discussed, being the unspoken and unacknowledged baseline upon which all the three parties operated.

However, amongst many unions, there is also some elementary appreciation that to effectively fight the forthcoming cuts and privatisation agenda in the public sector that new civil alliances of the providers and users of public services are required. This awareness is slight and muted at the moment. It will need to grow considerably and be acted upon if the potential of these alliances of resistance and opposition are to be realised.

So the union movement does not completely start from scratch here in these terms but this provides no room for complacency because the size and scale of the task facing the unions here is genuinely enormous. To put it bluntly, a rebellion the size and scale of that around the poll tax is needed.

The last mass popular and successful rebellion was that over the poll tax, and involved millions of people in a range of activities. The key to understanding the poll tax rebellion was not just the anger it generated. Nor was it just that it affected the overwhelming majority of citizens at the same time and in the same way.

Rather, the nature of the poll tax meant that the opposition to it had the leverage created by the government requiring citizens to register for it and then pay it (as it was not deducted at source as income tax is). So there was a 'holy trinity' of a) mass, direct and undifferentiated impact, b) the cost and injustice were immediately obvious and quantifiable, and c) there was leverage to resist through non-payment because the tax was dependent upon cooperation. This meant the poll tax rebellion was a genuinely mass one, with hundreds of local groups made of thousands upon thousands of campaigners.

It is self-evident that individual unions on their own will be unable to effectively resist the cuts and privatisation. It is also highly probable that unions acting together as a single union movement – assuming even that could happen – are unlikely to be able to stop the cuts and privatisation for a number of reasons. In this situation creating alliances of providers and users of services can help add to the strength of unions' opposition. This is far more than just a case of increasing the numbers of activists and supporters involved, important though that is.

Rather, there is a key political reason for forming such alliances, and this has two dimensions to it. The first dimension is that critics will find it very easy to portray the unions' action as nothing more than the protection of sectional and vested interests and thus to the detriment of the greater good in the new age of austerity.

By creating these alliances of providers and users this criticism can be potentially circumvented and negated because 'vested interest' is situated within altruism and on pursuit of the common good. The second dimension is that linking the providers and users of the public services helps establish the intimate and tangible link between the jobs and their terms and conditions of the job holders, on the one hand, and the quality of the services provided, on the other.

But these alliances cannot be just or remain as alliances of elite campaigning groups like the headquarters staff of a union and the headquarters staff of a non-governmental organisation. Difficult though it is to achieve, these alliances must be mass and participatory. This suggests that local groups are needed which can be active around the local dimensions and issues of the national agenda being pursued by the alliance.



"a single alliance of all the unions, certainly the public sector ones, is far from assured. This is due to reasons of political differences and rivalry as organisations."

Creating these alliances and making them effective will not be easy. The nature of the impact of cuts and privatisation means that not every citizen is affected in the same way and at the same time. For example, cuts and privatisation in the NHS most immediately affect the patient, their families and friends but we do not all use the NHS at the same time and in the same way. And cuts and privatisation are something that is done to us and we can be left feeling powerless and disenfranchised by it. By contrast, there was a level of dependence of government upon citizens in the case of the poll tax. Here, it was a case of what 'we did' rather than just 'what was done to us'. In other words, there is a differential effect and one that does not necessarily lead to the possibility of citizens being able to empower themselves.

Even with such threats to members' jobs, terms and conditions, a single alliance of all the unions, certainly the public sector ones, is far from assured. This is due to reasons of political differences and rivalry as organisations. While relations between Unison and PCS – arguably the two key unions for the creation of these alliances given the public sector being the locus of the attention – have improved over the last couple of years (and indicated by the signing of a joint agreement on campaigning in 2009), the two unions remain at odds with each other. Unison has a clear tendency to act on its own in the belief that it is big enough to be able to not only do so but do so effectively. This is mistaken. By contrast, the PCS has since 2001 gone out of its way to seek alliances with other unions but has often been rebuffed. Even when such alliances are formed, they do not stand the test of battle when timetables for the different unions diverge. The same points about difference of perspective here can be made when the cases of Unite, the GMB and Royal College of Nursing are considered.

Then, of course, is the issue of the Labour Party. Its role and influence are not inconsiderable and even after the 2010 election it is still likely to have a considerable impact on the ability and willingness of unions like Unison (and Unite and the GMB) to mobilise. This will depend upon issues like whether the party moves to the left or right, whether it wants to remain respectable or not by eschewing extra-parliamentary action and whether it thinks it will be back in office in five years again or is out for a generation. The overall point raised here of difference concerns not just the willingness and ability to fight across sections. It also concerns the ability of unions to articulate a common vision of not just what they are against but what they are for – in other words, their positive alternative view of what public services should look like. Motivating and inspiring citizens to become active campaigners will hinge upon have a vision of a positive alternative.

Finally, most users of services are not organised as collectives so that the unions do not have the luxury of having readymade potential alliance partners. So while it is easy enough for unions to make links with various charities and pressure groups that work on behalf of a range of deprived and excluded groups, these organisations are not organisations of the groups themselves. Often they are organisations of professional campaigners who are well-intentioned and often well connected but they lack critical social weight and mass. Consequently, they do not have the capacity to act as mass organisations capable of mobilising their memberships.

The one clear exception is probably the National Pensioners' Convention. Another exception might be parents of school children because Parent Teacher Associations already exist. By contrast, organisations of claimants and the unemployed are so atrophied that it would be an exaggeration to even say that they are no longer shadows of their former selves. The same kind of point can be made about the various quangos that represent consumer interests. They are created by government fiat following acts of Parliament and are watchdogs (whether toothless or not). They are not campaigning organisations with voluntary memberships that number hundreds and thousands of people. Therefore, the unions may have to help create such groups, like claimant groups or revitalise others like groups of the unemployed, by using their own resources and organisation.

Thus, in summary, there are not inconsiderable difficulties in creating these alliances, whether on the provider or user side of the equation. However, they are not insurmountable but will require deliberate and united actions from the unions to stand a chance of success.

★ Gregor is Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Hertfordshire

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despite 'empowerment' people still have power

by Leo Singer

"The College principal says cuts will hit adult education"

"Services have been streamlined and centralised to curb duplication"

"increasing its council tax precept by 4.8 per cent"

"... plans to end funding for elite swimming, switch off street lights at night, cut two recycling centres and close crèches at leisure centres"

"... cutting around 70 jobs, with more to come in future years"

This is just a limited selection of headlines from the local papers all over Merseyside and Wallasey, collected this spring. Local governments are preparing us for a new era, a tightening of belts, expected after the national elections. Similar headlines are easy to find in papers all over the country. No wonder... as shit runs down.

So again, we hear echoes of Thatcher: 'There Is No Alternative', this time from all the three major parties. But luckily, the year 2009 brought us several surprises which show that working class people can effectively fight against austerity measures even in the crisis times. One can just mention the wildcat strikes at Lindsey oil refinery, the Visteon factory occupations of laid-off workers, parents' occupations of schools in Glasgow and London, official and unofficial postal strikes or brave refuse workers and street cleaners in Liverpool.

Another significant movement was the 'winter of discontent' in Wirral. Albeit shadowed by more spectacular wildcats and occupations in the national media, the Wirral case is really inspiring.

Wirral against the cuts

At the end of 2008, Wirral Borough Council announced a so-called 'Strategic Asset Review', planning massive cuts in public services: to close eleven libraries and forty-nine community facilities such as community and leisure centres, a museum, a theatre and swimming baths. Nine hundred jobs in social care and transport were meant to be contracted out. In this way the council planned to save £3.1 million... so that they could borrow £20 million to build new 'state of the art' buildings! Better not try to find any logic in it. At the same time local trade unions exposed the fact that the librarians, teachers and school head masters were banned to talk about these plans or to join any protests. However, the local politicians forgot the old saying, that you reap what you sow...

According to a quick local trade unions' survey, the local people's view was that libraries should be "within walking distance, places that children can get to unaccompanied if necessary to do school work, somewhere easy to get to with prams, that didn't cost £8 a trip on two buses, a place where they could access computers and books, a community resource for all". They wanted the council's library resources to fulfil these local needs "large centralised new builds would not.

According to **Fred MacCormack**, a resident from Moreton, the discontent and anger of inhabitants had been strengthened by the fact that Wirral Council was not seriously interested in hearing the opinion of local communities, which stirred them into action. **Jo**, who lives in Port Sunlight, recalls with enthusiasm: "It was a groundswell from the bottom up. People were writing letters, sending emails, signing petitions, discussing on Facebook, talking to their councillors, going to consultations, demonstrations. Everybody was talking about it."

Indeed, Wirral has not seen a similar people's mobilisation for a long time! Hundreds of protesters poured in to the session of the Council's Culture committee discussing the cuts in December 2008. People abhorred the superficial way the Council was planning to consult the residents.

They forced the councillors to organise four consultative 'area forums' in Birkenhead, New Brighton, West Kirby and Port Sunlight. Despite the fact that they were all packed into one week in the beginning of January, hundreds of people attended each of these meetings.

Wirral TUC estimate that all together 35,000 people took part in the consultation in some way. Let's add to it the two mass actions in freezing January, organised by trade unions: the march to Wallasey Town Hall on 11th January and the protest at the Civic Hall a few days later. More than three thousand people joined the Facebook group 'Save Wirral Services'.

The trade unions launched the Wirral Against the Cuts Campaign. Their goal was 'to coordinate all the different groups, to argue for all the libraries, not just any local library and to make the case for bigger political arguments'.



200 people marched two miles from wallasey town hall to the threatened wirral museum



Elaine Jones from Wirral TUC says: "We set up organising committees at eight of eleven libraries, organised public meetings (in Eastham we had four meetings, each over two hundred people) and coordinated the input of the committees into the inquiry as well as producing our own. We organised monthly Wirral Against the Cuts committees to co-ordinate the activity." Often, she could lean on members of pre-existing Friends of Libraries' groups. One of two local groups not founded by the unions was Hoylake Library Action Group. It was set up by Barbara Kirby, resident from Hoylake, who just got a very simple idea: she put up leaflets announcing her plan to start a local group. She also informed that she would be sitting in the local library every Saturday. Eight people came to the meeting on the first Saturday alone!... Despite threats from their bosses, some librarians helped undercover the local campaigning groups, e.g. with copying leaflets at work. Fred MacCormack was actively involved in both Hoylake local group and Wallasey coordinating group. He went to both newspapers on Wirral and asked them to see reader letters concerning closures. He analysed them all. Out of 167, only one was fully and one conditionally in favour of closures.

Community asset transfers: an empowerment?

Local politicians tried to calm people down. Their alternative to the closures was for the local community to take over management and maintenance of facilities under threat. However, this vision - called Community Asset Transfer - has been rejected by the popular movement. **Jo** says: "I don't feel it works. It is very difficult for people to run them on community basis. You just will get completely exhausted while trying to find funding for running these facilities. Just look at what happened with Byrne Avenue Baths!" The swimming baths was a registered charity which had leased the building from the Wirral Council fourteen years ago. It shut down in February 2009 due to a lack of grants, despite massive popularity and the local community helping with repair.

Alan Gibbons, a Liverpool writer who got involved in the campaign to save libraries, is not in favour of Community Asset Transfer either. "The position of our 'Campaign for the Book' is: taxpayers pay for these services. The services should be administered by local councils. That way you will get the statutory protection of the law for these services to exist. Once they are contracted out to some semi-official community base, which is something the Conservatives are very loosely talking about now, then I think you lose that protection. It is very easy then to make people make their own cuts. What you do is you make people in charge of an ever diminishing budget and ask them to choose what not to have. I don't think that's how you administer public services. I think you set up statutory minimum levels, that's what we are fighting for. That's why the act is so important. What I hate is all these reports that come out with titles such as empowerment and enhancement, they mean nothing. Unless there is a rigorous plan that sets out the minimum standards, they are a fraud.

Victory for libraries... the game is not over

In April 2009, the former Culture Secretary Andy Burnham ordered an inquiry into Wirral library closures. The 'Campaign for the Book', alongside thousands of others, targeted Burnham. **Alan Gibbons** recalls: "We were sending protest letters. The Culture Secretary responded that he "was not minded" to overturn the council decision. But we went on and the campaign against cuts kept going. A few months later, in April, he called the inquiry and he did it only because of the public and popular pressure."

"Once services are contracted out to some semi-official community base, which is something the Conservatives are very loosely talking about now... it is very easy then to make people make their own cuts. What you do is you make people in charge of an ever diminishing budget and ask them to choose what not to have."

The central government inquiry closed in October last year, concluding that Wirral Council's plan would have broken the law, specifically the 1964 Libraries and Museums Act. The document said the council "displayed a lack of logic" and "failed to make an assessment of local needs". People on Wirral burst out in celebration.

How do some of the participants see this victory? **Jo**: "It's all down to our individual decision to say NO and do something, at least a little bit. This may be a lesson for the period after the elections when the government will come with yet more cuts. People should never underestimate how much you can do as an individual".

Elaine Jones summarised the victory: "We co-ordinated and organised the anger that existed and as such were able to stop all closures." On the other hand, in **Jo**'s opinion "there was no overall coordination, apart from Facebook and Alan Gibbons' blog where people could get information and download the letter to councillors".

Fred MacCormack, who highly credits Elaine Jones' coordinating role, remains cautious: "Yes, we proved that community power still works. The problem is that all is quiet again." He hints to the fact that most community facilities to be axed were not libraries and thus remain without any legal protection.

So what's going to happen to the community and leisure centres, cultural facilities, swimming pool? I asked Wirral Council. The information manager Jane Corrin replied in a very brief email, confirming the concerns that Community Asset Transfers are going ahead, advertised in the local press, one by one, each separate. "The timetable for the closure of buildings " remains."

Last but not least, Wirral Council questions the 'truth' that the cuts in services have been brought about mainly by the credit crunch. In fact, already in 2006 Wirral councillors were discussing the closures of services to save some money. It's no surprise.

For many years public sector workers in the UK observed how businesses had tended to suck public services dry, and introduced the profit motive into them. The latest recession is just the peaking of this viral self-expansion of profit, with its 'managers' having lost any control over it. And as with any other virus, simply taking a pill does not help us in the long run. We need more radical changes in the economy than simply fixing the recession.

★ a shorter version of this article was published in Liverpool magazine *Nerve*.

If your community facilities are under threat, you may find the following sites useful:

Statutory Guidance for Closing a School
www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolorguidance.cfm?id=3

Parents Against School Closure
www.parentsagainstschoolclosure.davesinfo cafe.com

Save Our Schools Glasgow
www.sosglasgow.wordpress.com

Defend Education in Lewisham
www.defendeducationlewisham.wordpress.com

Cambridgeshire Against the Cuts
www.cambridgeshireagainstthecuts.org.uk

London Coalition Against Poverty
www.lcap.org.uk

the earth is not flat: a review

by David Broder

Against Nationalism is a pamphlet produced by the Anarchist Federation. The introduction explains that the document has its origins in arguments around the time of the winter 2008-09 war in Gaza, at which time AF argued for a 'no state' solution to the conflict.

The pamphlet scores a number of easy points against Trotskyist cheerleaders for movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas and details such groups' anti-working class credentials. However the far more interesting question posed by the pamphlet is the distinction between 'nationalism', 'resisting imperialism' and 'class politics'.

How did nation(alism)s come about?

"The nation is a smokescreen, a fantasy which hides the struggle between classes which exists within and across them. Though there are no real nations, there are real classes with their own interests, and these classes must be differentiated. Consequently, there is no single 'people' within the 'nation', and there is no shared 'national interest' which unifies them."

The pamphlet explains in some detail the consolidation of European nation states in line with the development of capitalism in the 16th to 19th centuries. Factors like the invention of the printing press and the establishment of a central state bureaucracy, added to the bourgeois-democratic ideas of popular sovereignty and citizenship, were the underpinning of the nation-state. Nation-states are not just an outgrowth of some common culture but a top-down project of galvanising the population behind the apparatus of the capitalist state. Many of the arguments here are similar to those in *Imagined Communities*.

Yet here *Against Nationalism* explains the development of nationalism wholly in terms of the development of European nation-states hundreds of years ago, even though its main polemical target is left-wing support for anti-imperialist nationalist movements. But the criteria explaining the consolidation of the French nation state tell us little about the formation of Palestinian nationhood, nor Irish nor Algerian, nor any nation subject to colonialism.

Of course, if you think that all nationalisms are the same then this would appear not to matter. But this merely divorces particular nationalisms from their historic roots and thus makes them impossible to understand, whether or not one thus attributes them progressive characteristics. This is a common failing of anarchist and Trotskyist schemas on the national question alike. But the earth is not flat, not all nation-states have the same basis for existence. For example, it is easy to think of many Third World nationalisms which emerged not from the gradual development of an industrial bourgeoisie who wanted to strengthen the apparatus of state, but rather as a reaction to imperialist rule.

This also relates to how we relate to everyday nationalist assumptions. AF also point to the fact that although a social construct, this set-up is presumed to be a natural state of affairs, "Whenever we involve ourselves in everyday life, we find ourselves defined in national terms... The division of the world's population into distinct nations and its governance accordingly is a given, and seems as straightforward as anything occurring in nature."

This argument does not only reveal that allegiance to a particular nation-state is an example of alienation, where we are ruled by attachment to social constructs which are not natural. It also shows that the national question has a real impact in the real world and cannot just be sidestepped. It is not merely a capitalist 'smokescreen' external to the mass of people, but rather a real factor in most people's consciousness. Money is as much of a social construct as freedom from national oppression. So too is the whole idea of democratic 'rights'. But that does not mean we do not want more of all three.

The national question and nationalists

The very fact that imperialism and states exist and create a national question means that it is real and not a fantasy. Palestine has never been a united, independent nation-state. So that might make one think the idea of Palestinian nationhood is a fake. But the Palestinians do have a shared culture and identity, because they have lived the common experience of subjugation by the Israeli state, which they commonly want to stop, and their national cause has developed accordingly.

Attempts to dismiss the national question are also problematic insofar as they sustain Eurocentric illusions in our rulers' internationalism. *Against Nationalism* comments 'By the last decades of the Nineteenth Century, the idea that each



the new face of american empire: liberal internationalism is a fraud

'people' had a moral right to their own nation-state was solidly established. The concerns about viability which defined earlier debates had disappeared. It was now a right of 'peoples', defined in whichever way, to a state of their own.'

This is an utterly mistaken view of the world as it was 100 years ago, and even today. At the end of the Nineteenth Century the majority of the world population were the subjects of colonial empires. The argument that these people could not govern themselves – and needed a civilising mission – was a commonly accepted justification for empire, not least among socialists such as Henry Hyndman and many leaders of Germany's SPD.

Even though Brown, Obama etc. no doubt consider themselves liberal internationalists, we hear echoes of the same attitude today – the endless occupation of Afghanistan and repeated US interventions in Haiti are also justified with the rhetoric of stopping contagion from 'failed states'. Not subjectively racist, not unwilling to co-operate with local elites, the leaders of the imperialist countries do nonetheless hold the assumption that certain states have the right to lord it over the world, and invade other countries, whereas others are irresponsible threats to the current world order, who ought to know their place.

True enough that freedom from the imperialist yoke may not bring peace. When the British left India there was a blood-bath. If the troops left Afghanistan, forces even worse than Hamid Karzai's government might take over. If the US troops had not intervened in Haiti after the recent earthquake the government would have collapsed entirely. But this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: imperialism has shaped the world in its own image, and has created a 'stability' based on imperial domination which if disrupted could have 'chaotic' consequences. *Against Nationalism* sidesteps this question, however. AF demand the troops leave Afghanistan yet also argue that national independence is pointless and will merely produce more warfare, asserting that nationalist forces are proto-states and thus bound to produce renewed oppression upon victory.

This is to ignore the distinction between a national cause – the struggle against national oppression and thus some limited extension of popular sovereignty – and a particular nationalist movement. Support for the Palestinians does not have to entail support for Hamas, even if it is Hamas who most ardently fight the Israeli state, and we must strongly oppose Hamas sexism, homophobia and hostility to strikes. The reverse is also true: nor do these actions on the part of Hamas somehow taint and render untouchable the Palestinian national movement, as Zionists who appeal to liberal public opinion would have us believe.

In this sense, conflating a particular nationalist grouping with all 'national' movements, AF in part mirror the mistake of groups like the SWP who cheerlead for Hezbollah. Such Trotskyist ideas are typified by Leon Trotsky's 1938 argument that in the hypothetical case of a war between fascist

Brazil and 'democratic' Britain, he would support fascist Brazil, since the alternative was the British imposing 'their' fascism on Brazil in place of the existing dictator Vargas. But what he does not explain is why Brazilian communists should 'mediate' their opposition to the British via the existing state apparatus and a regime which would deny them any space for political action. This position has been mimicked repeatedly for decades, for example in some groups' support for the wars of Saddam Hussein and Argentina's General Galtieri.

Are all states imperialist?

One of the main themes of *Against Nationalism* is that there are not a few imperialist states, but rather that all nation states are imperialist. This does relate to one relevant point worth making, namely to combat the idea that there are 'good peoples' and 'bad peoples'. The pamphlet argues that the fundamental equivalence of all nation-states is because the interest of every state is to advance the interest of its 'own' capitalism.

"The state negotiates access for domestic companies to resources, investment, trading and expansion abroad. The success of this process brings profits flowing back into the country in question and by enriching its business and the 'national economy', the state secures the material basis of its own power: it increases its own resources, wealth and ability to project itself. It is therefore not simply a puppet of 'corporate interests', but is an interested party in its own right."

The Commune often argues that we should not advocate statist measures, or some sort of 'socialist' control of the state, since in reality the state works in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole. However, as I have argued in a previous piece on imperialism and populism in Latin America, the analysis underlying that position needs more definition.

"the leaders of the imperialist countries hold the assumption that certain states have the right to lord it over the world, and invade other countries, whereas others are irresponsible threats to the current world order, who ought to know their place"

To take an unambiguous, if not typical, example, in Colombia it is not really the case that the government and the state advance the general and long term interests of the Colombian capitalist class. A very small elite, dependent on alliance with multinational corporate interests own the vast majority of land and sell natural resources at below-market prices. They systematically underdevelop infrastructure. There are railway lines straight from the mines to the coast for the purpose of exports, but not much of a passenger train service. The US had a similar relation to Fulgencio Batista's Cuba in the 1950s, and that is why Fidel Castro could appeal to a 'national' sentiment even though Cuba already had formal political independence.

In such circumstances a government of state-capitalist development would totally undermine the existing elite by rendering inoperable its dependent alliance with US imperialism: that is why in return for its many favours its rule is protected by seven US military bases and huge funding for the paramilitary drive against the FARC rebels. There is a long history of coups within Latin American ruling classes, including recently in Venezuela and Bolivia, as the result of such tensions among the capitalist class.

The mere fact of international alliances or promoting 'ideology' does not make a state imperialist. Colombia is not imperialist but its rulers are little but proxies of US imperialism. Where is the Bolivian, or Congolese, or Afghan corporation which gets cut-price privatised resources and controls foreign governments in the manner that American ones can? The reason is that the US state is massively more powerful than all others, indeed to the extent that they are the lynchpin of all international treaties and the only power that can act with total impunity and with no fear of meaningful sanctions.

This is, I repeat, not because there are 'good peoples' and 'bad peoples', but because of capitalist interests. But there is an established hierarchy of nation-states which orders the world capitalist system. The WTO, IMF, UN etc. all express the existing relations of dominance. It would not be somehow metaphysically 'better' for the US, EU and China to swap places in the ranks the preponderant powers, or to

ew of *against nationalism*

‘reverse the poles of national oppression’. But it is meaningless to oppose slogans such as support for the Palestinians or Haitians on the ground that they might somehow be elevated to the ranks of imperialist powers.

“economic interests are neither the only concern of the working class nor the only way in which class exists”

Gender, race and national oppressions

There are oppressions and divisions of labour which structure capitalism other than straightforwardly defined social class. These are facets of an alienated anti-human class society but are not simply binaries of class: for example, the division of labour and power in society to the disadvantage of women; the differing roles migrant workers as opposed to ‘British-born’ workers (as well as overt racism); homophobia and sexual repression.

There are different responses to such questions, but most left groups would consider their own to be one of ‘class politics’ rather than ‘identity politics’. As opposed to merely rendering the ruling class more ‘diverse’ – more black people on company boards, more women MPs – they stress the importance of working-class unity across gender, national, racial etc. lines. Normally this would be coupled with some alternative approach to organising (collective, democratic, in unity with other workers) as opposed to liberal lobbyist organisations like the Fawcett Society.

Nonetheless, in spite of these different approaches to organising, fundamentally these struggles do not only affect workers, and go beyond the mere economic structures of class society. For example, a socialist feminism is not just ‘equality with men’, but one which challenges fundamentally the hierarchies and alienation in society, including those rooted in capitalism but also those within the working class and left organisations. It is much more than trade union militancy which happens to include women, as well as being far removed from radical feminism.

So too can the national question be defined in terms other than those of divisionism and bigotry. Communists do not have to simply tail nationalist militias nor grant them sole ownership of the struggle over national oppression. For example, mass collective action rather than terrorism; effective direct action in the imperialist countries against wars and multinationals rather than liberal lobbying of MPs or peaceful protest marches; attempts on the part of the oppressed to appeal for solidarity from soldiers and civilians in the imperialist countries; and so on.

What are ‘class politics’?

The slogan, as perpetrated by the likes of the Socialist Party (and in their own way, the ICC), that all workers should organise together irrespective of their gender, race and nationality, is an inadequate response to the question. Even if desirable, it is not incumbent on black workers to

wait on unity with white workers before they can take action against racism. Just like ‘Black and white, unite and fight’, the idea of Palestinian and Israeli workers’ unity is a fine ideal: but cynical deprecation of the existing Palestinian movement, and demanding of it that it wait forever on the support of the Israeli working class, is illusory. Workers in imperialist countries and underdeveloped ones cannot just unite around wage demands and common material interests: imperialism is a class question, and too much of the British labour movement is on the wrong side.

Against Nationalism asserts that “It is through mass struggle that consciousness develops. Under capitalism, ‘pure’ struggles rarely exist. It is through struggle in the defence of material working class interests, related to material demands – more pay, less hours, access to services, eventually against work and capitalism altogether – that the bonds of nationalism can be severed by posing the incompatibility of our needs with the needs of capitalism to stay profitable. The separate interests of classes become apparent in such struggles, and the ability to draw the conclusion that the capitalist system itself must be destroyed can and has spread like wildfire.”

Thus underlying the pamphlet is the assumption that better living conditions and more welfare are ‘class questions’, and fighting for these is the way to develop consciousness of the need to overthrow capitalism. Nationalism (and presumably, gender oppression and racism...) melt away with the advent of militancy. This is very similar to the politics of the Socialist Party – everything is reduced to ‘class politics’. Nowhere do AF advocate, for example, what kind of means the oppressed should use to combat imperialism itself, only abstractly advocating a struggle against capitalism.

This kind of attitude is wrong for three reasons. Firstly, there are plentiful examples of workers militant in the struggle for their own interests but sectional and indifferent to other oppressions. Indeed, the dockers who marched in support of Enoch Powell in 1968 – which gets a mention in *Against Nationalism* – were very militant in the fight against their own bosses. There is a very long and deep history of protectionism, ‘skilled-ism’ and chauvinism in the British labour movement, and even more so in American trade unions. The Lindsay oil refinery strike’s slogan ‘British Jobs for British Workers’ was not particularly new, even in the miners’ strike there was much waffle about the British miners being best in the world.

Secondly, economic interests are neither the only concern of the working class nor the only way in which class exists. To again take the most obvious and extreme case in point, Israeli and Palestinian workers cannot unite and fight over workplace concerns: the disparity between them is huge, and most Israeli workers are pretty happy about that; they do not have common employers and most Palestinians are not employed as workers at all; and the single most important oppression in both countries, tying the Israeli workers’ interests to those of the Israeli state and affecting everyday

life in Palestine, is the Israeli state’s merciless oppression of the Palestinians and theft of land, water and resources. If your home is demolished, if your union is terrorised by US-backed paramilitaries, or you cannot have your children educated in your own language, then national oppression structures your whole existence. It is crude indeed to try and displace the movement against such attacks in favour of workplace organisation on ‘class struggle’ grounds.

Thirdly, obtaining a better position for the working class in capitalist society is not communistic as such. It may help build a movement or build people’s confidence and solidarity such as to overthrow capitalism: that could result from a national struggle as much as one for higher wages and shorter hours. But AF simply have no strategy for national or anti-imperialist struggles. Ever-better working conditions and a bigger welfare state will not eventually ‘open out’ into a stateless, moneyless society either: in fact, the communist project is one which seeks to dissolve class relations and hierarchies in society, not merely advance a ‘militant’ workers’ movement. Higher wages or more public services do not fundamentally challenge class society any more than other particular struggles nor necessarily prove the common interests of all workers.

Conclusion

Against Nationalism draws very broad lessons from a few specific cases, dismissing the importance of fighting national oppression on its own terms, but rather ‘militarism, nationalism and war’. Rather than addressing the national question it papers it over with vague references to proper class politics. Essentially, it lacks any solution to national oppression other than general advocacy of getting rid of capitalism.

But there can be a communist approach to the national question which neither supports elitist nationalist groups – who merely want their ‘seat at the table’, equality with other states – nor ignores the need to combat national oppression on its own terms.

It is quite possible to call for the independence of a country, and oppose the exploitation of its resources by multinationals, with a movement which does not ally with state-capitalist or Islamist national movements; which is based on mass collective action and not on suicide bombings or deals with this or that other power; which does not construct new relations of oppression or a new state apparatus. Fleetingly this was attempted in the Ukrainian revolution, both Hungarian revolutions and the Kurdish workers’ councils of 1991, and today in the indigenous Minga movement in Colombia.

There is nothing about the idea of ‘nationhood’ which any more than gender or race binds a movement to bourgeois politics: that is merely part of the projects of certain forces arising in opposition to imperialism. Communists must not sideline or dismiss the national question in order to solely focus on ‘class politics’, but rather confront all such obstacles to a truly human society head-on.

BEYOND RESISTANCE

A COMMUNIST DAY SCHOOL HOSTED BY THE COMMUNE

Our summer school takes place from 11am to 6pm on Sat 19th June at WEA, 96-100 Clifton Street, London EC2 (Old Street/Liverpool Street tube). £5 entry, £3 concessions.

All welcome. A draft agenda appears below, more details shortly.

10:00-11:00: Registration

11:00-11:30: Welcome plenary

11:30-13:00: Session 1

★ The capitalist crisis

★ The changed shape of the working class

★ Alienation and the critique of everyday life

13:00-14:00: Lunch

14:00-15:30: Session 2

★ How migrant workers fight back

★ Socialist feminist attitudes to organisation

★ Tenants’ struggles and community organising

15:30-15:45: Break

15:45-17:15 Session 3

★ Imperialism and the national question

★ Struggles over education

★ The democratic state and capital

17:15-18:00: Closing plenary

★ Where next for communists?

Please get in touch by sending an email to uncaptiveminds@gmail.com for more info, if you have any questions about the event or have any special requirements.

book tickets and follow event updates at thecommune.co.uk

and the struggle continues... women's liberation 40 years on

by Sharon Borthwick

In 1970, 560 women came together at Ruskin College, Oxford for the first UK women's liberation conference. The activist network Feminist Fightback met in London on 2nd May to look at how far we have come 40 years on, inviting all genders to "consider what feminism looks like today, how the struggle continues, and put the battles women fight today in the context of the history of the women's movement."

To aid comparisons of the women's movement then and now the programme included two films: *A Woman's Place* (Journeyman Pictures, 1970) and an episode of the BBC4 series on women, *Activists* (broadcast, March, 2010). Post introductions, the Feminist Fightback meeting continued with screening the 1970 film, which included footage of the Ruskin conference and The International Women's Day March held in London in 1971.

A great sense of urgency surrounded the Ruskin conference. Many more women than the organisers expected showed up for the event. Whilst women across the class spectrum were enlivened by each other's speeches and debate men were presiding over a crèche in the wings. Even long dead men honourably remembered by other men with head and shoulder busts in their image were not privy, women having covered them with shawls and scarves.

All aspects of women's lives were considered in the context of British society in 1970 – Women in prison, trade unions, housework, childrearing, for instances. One woman spoke of the need for "our children to be liberated from us", implying a suffocating atmosphere presided over family living, women isolated and confined by the mother role. Women questioned whether the so-called "maternal instinct" was a real or imposed thing.

They talked of possible alternative family structures where other adults and not the mother alone have childcare responsibilities such as communes. One middle-aged working class woman, wholly unused to speaking before a large audience, grew in confidence as she spoke of her life as a housewife and mother of four children as a life of missed opportunities. Another woman said she would like not to be thought a freak because she had no interest in children whatsoever. Women discussed the thorough injustice of their economic dependence on men, their work as mothers going unacknowledged and unpaid and the political implications of that – reproducing a workforce for capitalism whilst simultaneously being disenfranchised by that system.

The conference ended with the women agreeing on four basic demands:

1. Equal Pay
2. Equal Educational and Job Opportunities
3. Free Contraception and Abortion on Demand
4. Free 24 hour Nurseries

Some months later 4,000 women took to the streets of London for the International Women's Day March with placards and banners demanding these basic rights. They presented their petition in writing to 10 Downing Street. The seriousness of their demands to tackle the inequalities imposed on them by virtue of their biology did not stop these women's enjoyment of the march. There was a carnival atmosphere. A needlework dummy bound to a crucifix was held aloft by some women while others dance-exercised ironically to Eddie Cantor's 'Keep young and beautiful, its your duty to be beautiful'. One woman mocked beauty pageants, her sash reading, 'Ms Stress'. Clearly the Ruskin conference had been a resounding success, women politicised and adamantly seeking immediate changes to an unjust system.

So how are things looking in 2010? The sad answer is, not very good at all. In spite of the Equal Pay Act implemented in 1970 and the various adjustments made to it since women are still lagging behind men in financial status. They are far more likely than men to work in part-time employment as they are more usually the primary carers of either children and/or disabled or elderly relatives. Part-time work such as care-work or cleaning is given low status and is extremely poorly paid. The model of 'superwoman' is held as the ideal. Women are urged 'to have it all' – both the children and the career. This can effectively mean that you either pay – usually another woman – a low wage for childcare, or if lowly paid yourself, childcare will take up a disproportionate amount of your income.

Feminist Fightback are currently involved in a campaign to save Hackney nurseries, "cuts ... being handed out in a



1971 saw an impressive international women's day march in the wake of the ruskin conference

piecemeal fashion, with no warning to nurseries all over Hackney." Thus nursery fees go up and living standards go down making rubbish of Labour's insistence that they were fighting to reduce child poverty. And Britain with a Tory prime minister is sure to make matters far worse, a part of the Tory/Liberal pact being to immediately put into operation Tory plans to severely cut funds to all public services as to appease the IMF (America's chief say-so).

And so to the BBC4 documentary, where the feminist activists concentrated on made all these social conditions notable by not mentioning any of them. Finn Mackay is the founder of the London Feminist Network and Co-founder of the Feminist Coalition Against Prostitution and it was these movements that the documentary wholly centred around. Mackay is described on her blog, "She is a well-practiced public speaker with particular emphasis on violence against women, prostitution and feminism in the UK." Indeed, she appeared a charismatic leader in the film as with a raised fist she delivered her speech at The London Feminist Network's Conference to an all women audience, many of whom were in floods of tears.

The interviewer asked woman after woman what her chief concerns were regarding feminism. Cited were just these: male violence against women, prostitution, pornography and sexual objectification. There was much belittling of these women by the programme makers. They were mostly young, middle-class women living at home with their parents. Parents were also interviewed and rather geed along when showing prejudice against their daughter's activism, one mother saying she could not understand her daughter's penchant for dressing up while protesting against objectification.

Feminist Fightback rightly cut a huge swathe from this film that concentrated on food preparation for the LFN conference – veganism read as joyless Puritanism by the filmmaker, and the viewer impelled to think likewise.

Campaigns by LFN include Reclaim The Night, 'Bin the Bunny' (referring to the cynical use of the Playboy bunny emblazoned across children's clothes etc.) One woman spoke of the horrific event that had made her become an activist in the movement: recounting that after her daughter's friend had been gang raped, the police later made charges against her saying that she had perverted the course of justice, citing mobile phone footage her attackers had filmed. They eventually succeeded in getting the charges dropped but were further shocked to learn that there were no rape crisis centres in the whole of London.

There was some extremely disturbing footage of women from the LFN shouting "shame, shame" at people entering a lap-dancing club. They were shouting this as much at the female employees as at the male audience, creating divisions between those women and themselves.

After the film showings the mostly women crowd present at the Feminist Fightback event came together to discuss the

films, make comparisons and consider the feminist movement today. In the lively discussion, personal experiences were used as much as the historical perspectives raised by the films.

Much noted was the absolute absence of considerations surrounding class or indeed any other political analysis in the BBC4 film. Women spoke of their concerns about others considering feminism an outmoded if not dirty word. There was consensus that we should openly and unashamedly say that we are feminists to other women and men. How this consciousness raising is exercised was another problem discussed – not wanting to come across preachy, for instance.

We discussed the issue of objectification so concentrated upon by the women from LFN. Participants articulated the belief that the media perpetuated women's concern with their bodies by constantly documenting this apparent all consuming concern, anorexia, for instance, being a favourite topic of documentary makers. We discussed society placing such high value on being in a couple. One woman quoted a bride's speech, "I was nothing till I met you", "now I am complete". People expressed concern over feeling that you had to do your best to feign interest in wedding preparations – cooing over the dress for instance, women feeling that they would otherwise endanger friendships, though they are not allowed the space to say, "this is shit".

Many considered that LFN's demand to have porn banned by the state was not a progressive argument, and indeed a simplification of matters, particularly demeaning porn being a symptom that needs to be attacked via its root causes and likewise the LFN's attitude to prostitution; Feminist Fightback are demanding that sex-workers be decriminalised.

There was consensus that the BBC4 programme was horribly malicious and a farcical comparison with the 1970 Journeyman film. And what of women's own sexuality and their enjoyment of sex, should this not be talked about?

Many other subjects were touched upon at this meeting. In fact all of the grass-root feminist concerns the women from the 1970 Ruskin conference were talking about then are still very much the concern of Feminist Fightback now. It is a terrible shame that the media present body image and objectification issues above all else as grass-roots feminism, when you only need to watch *A Woman's Place* to know that that is absolutely not the case. Feminism must be bound with political activism.

a correction

★ In issue 13 of *The Commune* an otherwise glowing report of the Manchester Anarcha-Feminist weekend suggested that the venue was not accessible for disabled people. Since then we have been contacted to inform us that lifts were indeed available. Our apologies to the event organisers.

communists must organise as communists

by Chris Ford

The coalition of capital

The coalition government has been heralded as the start of a 'new politics' and a 'new era of pluralism'. But for many the buzzwords offer little consolation, there is dread at the return of the Conservatives and resentment amongst those who voted Liberal-Democrat to stop them, some thinking they were 'to the left of Labour'.

Far from marking a new beginning the election and the coalition has been a demonstration of deception, a deception that there is a 'national interest', a deception of political-pluralism and the reality of Parliamentary democracy.

In the days leading up to the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition, all the conniving leaders, Brown, Clegg and Cameron declared their scheming to govern was in the 'national interest'. This idea of the national interest masks the reality that the UK, far from being unified is divided into social classes, where the majority, the working class, are exploited through a system of wage slavery. Compelled to sell their capacity to work, wage-workers are dependent on employers providing them with employment. Out of the fact that employers depend on workers labour power to create profits the myth of a common or national interest in this relationship is propagated.

“Capitalist pseudo-pluralism amounts to changing governments who all operate within the parameters of the system, differing on how best to manage the needs of capital, fluctuating between varieties of monetarism and Keynesianism.”

This capitalist matrix not only conceals the class character of the state but masks the vast extra-parliamentary power of capital, in whose interest the legislative, executive and judicial bodies serve. The owners and directors of BP, Shell, Barclays, Glaxo, BT, Tesco, Rio Tinto, and BAE etc are the unelected senior partners taking and influencing the key decisions on our lives. It is these forces which called the shots in the cohering of a coalition for 'stable government' to safeguard 'the markets'.

The election afforded the 45 million eligible voters an apparent participation in the management of the state. This is a passive role in political life, detached from those elected who are irremovable for years. The class bias is further revealed in application of electoral law. Trade unions are bound to a 50% + 1 requirement in their ballots for strike action. The Tories secured a vote of 36% and the Liberal-Democrats 23%: if the principles applied to unions were enforced on these parties their election would be void.

Defenders of capitalism have long criticised communists as being against political pluralism. But if the election and coalition has revealed anything it is the pseudo-pluralism of capitalist politics. There are clear differences between Labour, Liberals and Tories but there is an essential overarching unity confirmed by the coalition of what appeared to be antagonistic wings of bourgeois politics.

The Tories and Liberals are longstanding parties of the British ruling class; the Labour Party abandoned any pretence of social-democratic reformism and openly embraced neo-liberalism. All these conniving politicians agree that 'there is no alternative' to capitalism and that the principle role of parliament and government is the stabilisation and re-stabilisation of the system. Capitalist pseudo-pluralism amounts to changing governments who all operate within the parameters of the system, differing on how best to manage the needs of capital, fluctuating between varieties of monetarism and Keynesianism.

We can expect pseudo-pluralism to continue, even institutionalised with by electoral reform. Despite the bleating of stability as self-justification by Cameron/Clegg it may be wishful thinking as the structural crisis of capital extending through the body politics.

Austerity socialism and the working class

Gone is all talk of an end to the recession. The coalition is set to enforce £6 billion 'efficiency savings' on public spending, even though the Liberal Democrat's manifesto pledged their postponement. This will have a major impact on the jobs and social welfare of millions of workers. Austerity policies mean making the working class pay for the crisis, to safeguard capital and attempt to revive the profit rates. Such measures will utilise the armoury of existing laws and if necessary beef them up to ensure the capitalist state is in

“Some, including self-proclaimed Marxists, are calling on socialists to join or rejoin the Labour Party”

a position to carry through the capitalist offensive. How will the working class respond?

A key feature of the New Labour years has been the political *disenfranchisement* of the working class. For the last 13 years repeated efforts to constitute a new independent working class force have ended in failure. To reforge the political and organisation independence of our class remains an unfinished but necessary project. Due to this failure the majority of the labour movement remains tied to the Labour Party. The new leadership will no doubt adopt a pseudo anti-Tory radicalism and seek to re-harness the movement to the Labour Party. But Labour has no realistic alternative to offer but austerity socialism because it accepts that capitalism is here to stay. Despite rhetoric about callous Tories, they were prepared to go down the same route if they had remained in government. Workers do not vote Labour because they believe it will defend their interests but to keep the Tories out.

What is shocking today is the amnesia and complacency of the traditional left. It is prepared to rehash a state-socialist Labourite alternative that failed in the past and can't provide any answers to the present. Some, including self-proclaimed Marxists, are 'calling on all socialists to join or rejoin the Labour Party to fight against the cuts and to defeat New Labour.' This is ignoring the transformation under Blair/Brown and how it is viewed by millions of workers. Those who argue the dogma of Labour as the lesser evil or that it can be reclaimed, are retarding an alternative to capitalism. Instead of encouraging the working class to build the sort of movement it needs, they restrict horizons to make do with the grand illusion of the lesser evil.

The development of independent united workers' fronts to defend our class irrespective of the electoral fate of Labour should be primary. But this is clearly not enough: militant trade unionism and left-wing reformist socialism may contribute to resistance but it cannot provide a solution. The real issue is not which parcel of rogues comprises the coalition or replaces Brown. The real issue we face is which social class can impose its interests on society. The real choice is which needs to be posed is that between different forms of society – capitalism or communism.

We do not have a significant, coherent communist force today. The old 'official' Communist Party is essentially a social-democratic party and became absorbed into the labour bureaucracy. Its perspective is to support groups that can "enhance the possibility of reclaiming the Labour Party'. Instead, we urgently need the recomposition of communists into a more unified organisation. We cannot wait on the traditional revolutionary left, they have proved a hindrance.

Is communist refoundation possible?

The discussion around the subject of communist recomposition and organisation is one of the most important that is taking place in the pages of *The Commune* at present. Having managed to effectively bring together a very diverse current of communists of different ideas is an achievement in itself. In most organisations there would have been expulsions or a split by now. Some have made the proposal that the next step in the development of our network should be towards a communist league, a federation of communists.

A league must be an organisation which allows plurality of tendencies and opinion, and be open to the experiences of others, which guarantees the widest possible participation and democracy; a league whose policies and political positions will be a reflection of social struggles and discussion between various members, tendencies and platforms in the league. But we should seek to change the understanding of factions and bodies of opinion as not an expression of a desire of one group to conquer or capture positions but as a furtherance of ideas, a contribution to the formation of theory and practice of the organisation.

Such a *communist pluralism* should not be seen as internalising within the league the pluralism associated with bourgeois democracy. Gyorgy Lukacs was of the view that that to successfully participate in the struggle for working class emancipation organisation is indispensable, so that ideas have a possibility of becoming a material force that can change society. This has consequences for inner-working of communist organisation in not being cut off and aloof, of not recreating the alienated social relations of a capitalist environment inside our own organisations. For Lukacs this must more than the pluralism of bourgeois democracy but a participatory self-management, where it is a "world of activity for everyone of its members":

"True democracy, the abolition of the split between rights and duties is, however, no formal freedom but the *activity* of the members of a collective will, closely integrated and collaborating in a spirit of solidarity'."

Lukacs also cautioned that that "every communist organisation" must have the "ability to *learn* from every aspect of history. It must make sure the weapons used to gain a victory yesterday do not become an impediment in future struggles."

The proposed league is nowhere near the scale of organisation Lukacs was discussing; however the principles if an organisation is to be sustained are helpful. It is my view that a new league should be built on the principles that:

- ★ It should be an organised form of communist class consciousness, its relationship to the working class being to assist in generating communist consciousness through agitation and educational activities.

- ★ A league should also be subordinate to the working class and not substitute itself for it as the actual revolutionary subject nor as the future instrument of workers' self-government. Its role should be to assist in developing the self-organisation and self-management of the class, giving impetus to its revolutionary potential.

- ★ Communism as a movement towards de-alienation of society requires that communist organisations institute communist pluralism and a diversity of opinion engaged in the creation and coordination of the league's theory and practice.

- ★ The league would be a voluntary association, of full and free discussion for every member: this direct-democracy implies selection of officials/holders of responsibilities by the membership and complete accountability and recallability.

In issue 13 of *The Commune* Ed Griffiths of the Communist Corresponding Society cautions against premature unity. In light of the failures of repeated unity initiatives, caution is understandable but there is also room for optimism. The process of convergence of those engaged in communist discussion and agitation is more achievable in the near future than perhaps thought. Furthermore for such a project of recomposition to succeed it needs to be projected from the earliest opportunity by communists.

How could a league of communists come about? It is my view that *The Commune* with individuals and organisations facilitate through our network a convergence. We have a *political platform* which certainly lays the basis to move beyond our current level of organisation. There is of course a question of trust. An attraction of *The Commune* is the absence of many of the negative traits of the left, including the environment of its forums and reading groups, its pluralism and diversity.

Furthermore the fact that we are still developing organisationally is a statement that our project is not a finished work which is to be placed before others in a take-it-or-leave-it manner, but a genuine invitation to participate in a creative process of developing a new communist initiative.

My views of a new communist league can be summarised:

- ★ That we open up dialogue with fraternal communist organisations and individuals to discuss our invitation to unite with us in a federation, based upon the principles contained in the political platform published in *The Commune*.

- ★ That The Commune should play a unifying role in becoming the joint publication of the new league, establishing a central editorial collective elected by an all-members conference, with reserved seats for amalgamating organisations. Prior to such a conference a joint editorial collective may be necessary.

- ★ That existing publications of individual communists and amalgamating organisations should in the spirit of unity and organisational growth, also declare in each issue that it is part of the federation and a publication of this or that organisation/platform, part of the league.

- ★ That the structure of a new federation comprise local communes and circles, these branches being essentially communist unity committees, regular aggregates, a national conference, and an elected editorial committee.

- ★ That the process of convergence in a federation recognises the importance of the development of a perspective of both theoretical and practical activities.

Many activists may justifiably consider launching yet another organisational initiative premature. My response is that we cannot continue to wait for the traditional left regrouping or a spontaneous new development. Far from being premature a new communist organisation is long overdue. At the present time we are speaking of very small beginnings but the possibilities are great, and with positive steps and increased membership, over time activity can be extended.

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

★Beyond Resistance: 19th June summer school. See page 9 for details.

★London: We have organising meetings every three weeks, the next is on Monday 31st May. Email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com for venue details.

The next public forum is a debate on whether ecological struggle is class struggle. From 7pm on Monday 24th May at the Horse and Groom, Curtain Road, 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 council communism and syndicalism, will be held from 6pm on Sunday 30th May at Cafe Kino, Ninetree Hill, Bristol. See website for suggested reading.

★Sheffield: we have monthly communist discussion forums. 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.

★North-West: the next Manchester Class Struggle Forum is a discussion on communist organisation: 7pm on Thursday 3rd June 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 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

thecommune.co.uk
uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

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