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fighting the cuts: the task ahead

By Kojo Kyerewaa

The emergency budget comes as no surprise to most on the revolutionary left. The Coalition agreement, rather than holding back Conservative plans for dismantling the welfare state, has instead legitimised them in the public's eyes.

The day after the budget, polls showed that 57% of the population approved of the cuts. Although polls can't necessarily be trusted, there was a distinct lack of protests.

The Trades Union Congress burped that this was reckless and the government must think again, Labour ex-cabinet ministers cried that it is unfair and should be done in a more "responsible" way.

At the same time some on the left called for a general strike and Greek style resistance from a population pacified by insurmountable personal debt, *the Sun* newspaper and Sky TV.

Make no mistake, this is the gravest attack not only on public services but also on the working class since Thatcher.

However, it is far wide-ranging, cementing and deepening Labour's attempts to privatise state-run services.

The impact and long lasting effects of these proposals if implemented will be a shock to many and devastating for millions. The unemployed pit valleys in Wales and desolate streets in sections of Liverpool mask the deeper psychological trauma, working class communities are still recovering from 30 years on.

Ken Livingstone angles for office, pitching his tent as the trusted defender of London against the Tory government, Bob Crow has been handed the opportunity to don his cap as the 21st Century's Arthur Scargill calling for a general strike.

Yet this is not the 1980s: trade union membership is half what it was in 1979, whilst the average age of members has doubled and Thatcherite anti-trade union laws are firmly established.

Moreover, the Labour Party is much more right wing and the revolutionary left far smaller. Moreover the 1980s ended in defeat, which resulted in the decline of trade union power and militancy.



we should defend jobs and public services, but without any "rose-tinted view of the welfare state"

Though now the cuts have started to nibble at the edges of previous pledged spending plans, there have been howls of pain, pledging resistance, even from Liberal councillors: but what is the task now for those who not only want to defend our class but advance it?

We need to build the strongest united front, the British left has ever seen. It will probably not be in the form of a political party, but a network of coalitions, diverse in its support, but not reliant on politicians or union leaders.

It can only be composed of the working class - even if with middle-class sympathisers - united in the objective of opposing the attacks on the living standards of the working class.

Though the situation is severe, alarmist slogans will not draw out the latent power of our class.

We need a story to tell to inspire our class, it must resonate with all members; the young as well as the old, the migrant and British born.

The message is that the Emergency Budget is in the interests of the rich few, at the expense of collective wealth of the many.

Left unchallenged it will be devastating for the majority. Nothing other than our collective strength through a campaign of civil and industrial disobedience will be able to stop this dangerous ideological experiment.

This campaign cannot be one that defends the status quo or has a rose-tinted view of the welfare state.

Where we will differ from our social democratic allies is that our aspirations go beyond perpetuating a bureaucratic and capitalist-serving state.

We must argue for the abolition of the state, a tool for the transfer of our collective wealth to a privileged, parasitic class.

This doesn't mean we should resort to sectarianism or bickering with Labour Party members: but whilst uniting with them on actions, we remain distinct in identity, something that can only be maintained in open democratic structures.

To maintain and propel a genuine united front, we need open, transparent and democratic structures, involving positions of accountability, not to form hierarchies, but to ensure responsibility for agreed action.

For example, South London Anti-Fascist Group has built small scale united fronts, involving anarchists, Trotskyists, and various members of the working class including social democrats, trade unionists, Muslims, Catholics and Gurkhas.

We need more of a 'unity in action despite diversity of outlook' position.

Community organising is essential: the trade union movement cannot be relied on alone. History tells us that this isn't enough.

We must act locally, but move from haphazard individual anti-cuts coalitions to build this broad network of alliances, focussing on action and not sectarian interest.

Sectarianism is a luxury for those who will not face destitution by failure.

The government has declared class war and we will be tested for loyalty to our class by our ability to overcome sectarian divisions. Failure to do so is a gift to the ruling class.

no liberation for afghans

★ As UK troops pulled out from the Sangin area of Helmand in early July, commanders hailed the successes of their mission in Afghanistan.

Yet at the same time the US-backed president Hamid Karzai has sought reconciliation with the Taliban, demonstrating the sham of 'democracy' brought by imperialist troops. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan reports:

By inviting the Taliban, the leaders of the Islamic Party and other "Jihadi leaders" to be part of a "Consultative Peace Jirga," Hamid Karzai is committing yet another crime against the Afghan people.

He has installed former Soviet puppets and Northern Alliance warlords in key posts of his government. He even went as far as assigning the two most notorious warlords, Karim Khalili and Qasim Fahim, as his vice presidents.

Now, he calls the Taliban and Islamic Party terrorists "sons of Afghanistan" and tries to either share power with them, or offer them the opportunity of asylum and amnesty for their leaders in any country of their choice.



US-backed hamid karzai has even spoken of joining the taliban

He is also offering jobs to their gunmen so he can prolong his mafia-style rule with peace of mind.

The puppet government of Afghanistan could not even consider making peace with the Taliban and Islamic Party assassins without receiving a green light from their US masters.

This in itself proves that the US doesn't just want a puppet government, but also a stable and efficient government to easily transform Afghanistan into a strong military base in Asia, extend its grip on the oil and gas of the Central Asian Republics and maintain its supremacy in competition with rivals such as China and other regional powers.

It is crystal clear to even our children that the US claims about bringing "democracy" and "women's liberation" to Afghanistan were the biggest lie of the century.

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‘the resurgence of unions in the strangest of places’...

Angela Gorrie reports on Dundee

While traditional manufacturing industries are declining in Dundee, it's beginning to seem like workers' struggles are on the rise.

It's saying something when a city which once boasted to be the home of 'Jute, Jam and Journalism' now lists Tesco as its largest single employer. Of the 29 companies who employ more than 300 people, few can claim to be involved in any kind of manufacture. While Michelin still remains, the likes of Timex have been replaced by companies specialising in biotechnology and computer games and the city council never tire of talking up their so called 'Cultural Quarter'.

The 1993 Timex strike, where locked out striking workers continued to fight against their employers for over six months until the factory's eventual closure, has recently been remembered as a both a play and an exhibition at the local university.

While it's unlikely to be long remembered outside the city, last year's workers occupation of the Prisme Packaging factory should also serve as an inspiration.

Despite not being involved with any trade unions, when told they were to lose their jobs with no compensation, the twelve workers occupied the premises to demand their agreed redundancy payments.



prisme packaging saw one of the first occupations of 2009

Their victory was far greater than this as a few weeks later they had won enough support and financial backing to set up the co-operatively run Discovery Packaging. Despite a tough first year, their company is still trading. A perfect example that fighting back can work.

Dundee is currently seeing the resurgence of unions in the strangest of places, within D.C. Thomson, publishers of the *Beano*, *Dandy* and local papers *The Courier* and *The Evening Telegraph*.

The publisher has a well deserved reputation for being anti-union, breaking with the unions shortly after the 1926 General Strike. However, following last month's announcement of 350 job losses at their printing works, open union meetings have been held with reports of large numbers of staff joining the National Union of Journalists.

Like most employers, they claim that profits are down. In reality however dividends increased last year from £13.8 to £14.5 million - with the the three family directors, not exactly short of a pound or two, raking in £250,000 between them.

This announcement comes on top of a long chain of events which has seen high cost management consultants being hired and further staff given early redundancy.

The greatest irony of all is that the *Courier*, their best known publication in the area, is currently running a campaign... to safeguard Dundee jobs!

a ripple in the coming storm

Joe Thorne reports on Hackney

On the last day of June, nearly fifty trade unionists, socialists, and community activists met in an old church hall in Hackney, east London. We came together to discuss the wave of public sector cuts which has already begun, and how we can organise to push them back.

Around the city, and across the country, equivalent meetings have been held or will be held shortly. Many of them, such as ours, will decide to establish campaigns of one sort or another. The real content of these campaigns, just like the content of the meetings, will differ widely.

But it is likely that these groups, where they exist, will become an important part of the terrain for class struggle activists, as long as cuts are still a live issue. Therefore, we need to establish a dialogue about the real nature of these groups, their activity, and the role which communists ought to play within them. We need to share our experiences and discuss ideas.

In Lambeth, a local meeting on the same day attracted 19, who agreed activities including lobbies of the council, distribution of an anti-cuts broadsheet produced by local trade unions, and to formally establish an Alliance. In Haringey, 15 had attended a meeting on 27th May: an Alliance was established there too; a blog, a conference and perhaps a bulletin are planned. In Southwark, a meeting is planned for 19th July.

In Hackney, the meeting was called by the local trades council, having been asked to do so by the local government Unison branch. After everyone introduced themselves, there were two very short presentations by delegate from the Haringey Alliance, and an organiser from a fairly new community coalition called "Hackney Unites". (The nature of such "broad-based organisations", of which the more well-known London Citizens is another example, needs a whole article to itself.)

This meant that most of the meeting could be given over to a discussion about what we need to do to fight the cuts. Some other local meetings so far appear to have been much more given over to speeches from councillors, including those who will implement the cuts. Because it blurs political and class lines, and because it is practically useless in terms of organising, we should argue against this sort of thing.

What *do* we need to do? There is no easy answer. Some speakers stressed the importance of demonstrations, both on a local level, and nationally - the SWP's Right to Work campaign has called a demonstration outside the Tory party conference on 3rd October.

One speaker said that in order to assist the cuts, if we are realistic, we need organisation of the level last seen during anti poll tax movement, which organised in committees street by street, and workplace by workplace. In my view, we will need to organise demonstrations - and direct action besides - but the ferocity of the impending attacks does bear comparison with the poll tax: so our response must recognise that.

If this is correct, it implies that we raise our activity to a whole new level. Unless we are able to raise confidence and consciousness to produce mass direct action, including mass industrial action, then we will utterly fail, and no



there will undoubtedly be more protest marches against cuts: but how do we move from here to successful direct action?

demonstration, be it 1 million, 2 million, or 3 million strong, will change that. We need to be honest about that.

One danger with such groups is that they seek to adopt a merely "practical" role. That is, shake buckets for strike funds, leaflet, hold solidarity meetings, provide legal advice, and so on. All these things are good. But what is really needed is the sort of organisation, confidence, and awareness which allows individual disputes to be more militant themselves, and more likely to spread. Insofar as these alliances can do that work they will be valuable; insofar as they do not, we will need to organise our activity in other ways.

What have we agreed to do in Hackney? One resolution was to produce an agitational bulletin - in our case edited by community member who volunteered at the meeting. Hopefully this will bring out voices from the community and workplaces, not simply carry slogans and official news. We need to organise regular, mass distribution.

We have already leafleted the annual festival of a large Turkish and Kurdish community organisation. It looks as though working groups are being set up for health and education - perhaps these will produce deeper rooted organising then we can expect from larger, less focused meetings. But all this said, it's early days. We really don't know what these committees will become, or what the best ways to organise are. That's why we need to continue this dialogue.

In Hackney, cuts have already begun. Cuts to nurseries and the local college are covered elsewhere in this issue. There have also been cuts at the local waste depot, and a number of teaching assistants have been made redundant in primary schools. These are not Tory cuts, not yet. They are Labour's last sigh in government, the first ripple in the coming storm.

harsh cuts in north wales

Steve Ryan reports on Wrexham

The reality of the savage attacks on the working class has united activists in North Wales

A meeting in Wrexham of the already established and active Shop Stewards Network debated the attacks and the response.

The cuts hit North Wales hard. Thousands rely on public sector jobs. In Wrexham there are estimated some 15,000 public sector workers, all delivering valuable services.

Slashing their jobs will diminish those services and, in reducing spending power, impact the local economy, itself only just recovered after the last Tory government closed mines and steelworks.

The meeting resolved to support strikes and action in North Wales, link up with other groups fighting back. It will have a stall with 'know your rights, join a union' leaflets and a spiky newsletter which will illustrate that workers should not be made to pay for the recession. These will be regularly on stalls in Wrexham and local carnivals, while there will be leafleting outside gigs at the forthcoming Llangollen fringe festival.

A public meeting has been called on 27th September with prominent movement speakers invited. The intention is to build toward the European day of action on 28th September, either with coaches to the rumoured national demo on London or if not local action.

The meeting was positive and determined. Solidarity and direct action is the way forward.

facing both ways?

by Gregor Gall

In recent weeks, the RMT union has put out a number of important calls to the union movement. First, it called for an emergency meeting of the TUC general council in order to develop a planned and pro-active collective response to the austerity package announced by the coalition government. Second, through its general secretary, Bob Crow, the union made a rousing call to arms at its annual conference for 'general and co-ordinated strike action across the public and private sectors to stop their savage assault on jobs, living standards and public services.'

In this, the union said 'The unions must form alliances with community groups, campaigns and pensioners organisations in the biggest show of united resistance since the success of the anti-poll tax movement. Waving banners and placards will not be enough – it will take direct action to stop the Cameron and Clegg cuts machine.'

In other words, the RMT was calling on the union movement to take Greek, French and Italian lessons through mass mobilisations. Yet, in the same two weeks as these developments, the TUC general council agreed to invite David Cameron to address its congress in September. There was only one dissenting voice on the general council (that of the FBU).

Initiated by TUC general secretary, Brendan Barber, the general council members bar one accepted his logic that the TUC and union movement should engage in dialogue with the new coalition government.

Here it seems that for the TUC it is pretty much business as usual in as much that the TUC wants to be accorded the status of a social partner by the new government even though there is no chance of that – certainly less so than there was under the 'new' Labour years.

But the problems confronting the union movement are much greater than this. While the RMT has put forward a vision of solidarity as well as how this can be envisioned in practical terms, it does not have the requisite social weight and does not organise in the key sectors that will be affected by the age of austerity. This means its voice will not gain the necessary resonance. Even if the other unions of the Trade Union Coordinating Group (like the FBU, PCS, POA) make similar calls, the same problem of social weight essentially remains. The left's weakness in Unison, Unite and the GMB is, thus, telling.

But more important than this is that the fragmentation of management and collective bargaining structures as a result of decentralisation makes it difficult – though not impossible – to coordinate action and resistance. Local authorities, the NHS and the civil service are all internally fragmented. When it comes to making redundancies and cuts to services, they will do so as individual authorities and trusts and at different times and in different ways and with different terms.

Then there is the situation that the rhythm and nature of the separate parts of the public sector will again be different in these regards from each other (i.e., local authorities versus the civil service).

The task for the union movement will be to try to resist the sectionalist imperative to take what terms and conditions are on offer for redundancy (which is all the more difficult when they are voluntary) or try to negotiate better ones on an employer-by-employer basis. Instead, there will be a need to try to not only resist but do so on a basis of coordinated and mutually supportive disputes.

The dangers of fragmentation are already evident for cuts already being made in the numbers of public sector workers, either as the result of previous 'new' Labour policies or because of the new coalition government's policies. And yet, there has been little or no resistance.

The last time that the union movement faced such a challenge of acting together when faced with a massive common challenge was under the Tories in the 1980s. Then, and facilitated by the 'Ridley Plan', it buckled and sectionalist values on material issues asserted themselves, breaking the possibility of a more generalised fight back. Hopefully, history will not repeat itself but the omens are not good.

from meltdown to upheaval

★ The Commune is planning to host a conference in London over the weekend of 11th-12th September. We have been debating what form this event should take.

A communist refuse worker involved in our network has made the following proposal for a day with a series of workshops discussing the effects of the crisis and how we respond.

At our aggregate on 24th July we will debate this proposal: if you are interested in attending, email us at uncaptiveminds@gmail.com.

The global crisis has lost its bubble form: the announcement of austerity measures, the first waves of mass struggle in Greece and the calls for a general strike in Spain have revealed its antagonistic class core. These mass protests are an expression of wider social unrest, but so far the protests remain on the level of 'victimhood of cuts' and 'institutional mobilisations'.

As working class revolutionaries we want to discover and support the new forms of antagonistic self-organisation, direct appropriation and communist practice within these mobilisations - and their repercussions and impulses within work-places and proletarian living areas.

Only if based on the daily proletarian reality and self-activity can the unrest can go beyond a delegated expression of discontent and become a search for a new society.

There is no lack of lefty conferences, most of them focusing on interpretations of the crisis or proposing new campaigns. We want to focus this conference on the debate of social experience and political practice in times of crisis: how does the crisis impact on our social reality, e.g. at work, in the proletarian terrain, in the political scene? how does it change and challenge our political efforts? We thought of running the conference along four main threads.

The Global Crisis

The first thread evolves around a common reflection of the current stage of crisis and class movements. We will try to go beyond a superficial celebration of 'general strikes' and 'mass demonstrations', but try to understand the tendencies of proletarian self-activity within. From PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain) to global wildcats.

The Local Impact

The second thread will depend largely the preparation we all do. We will ask people to write up and present short reports about the local impact of the crisis in their respective towns, about struggles which emerge in response and about how the left reacts to these new conditions - hopefully with reports about new initiatives and social experiences.



general strikes against cuts in greece: but what is their strategy?

The Practical Steps

Revolutionary activity has to be reflection in practical terms, analysis in action. We want to discuss about the role of, e.g. solidarity groups during work-place struggles (Vestas, Visteon etc.), about the importance and from of independent publications (*The Commune*, *The Catalyst*, Libcom etc.).

We want to debate how the crisis will change and challenge our 'social issue'-activities, e.g. around housing, benefit advice, squatting. So far the work 'with' migrant workers, tenants, claimants, neighbourhood inhabitants, co-workers etc. has been 'co-existing' - we want to try to debate our social experiences as part of class totality in the current wider social atmosphere.

The Future Coordination

We hope that the debates during the conference can result in basic forms of future collaboration. This could take the form of committees which can hopefully continue the debate started during the conference. This could happen e.g. by collecting regular updates and reports about the local crisis and struggle - for general circulation; of detailed 'work-place interviews' with people in our political scene; or a committee engaged in putting together a basic pamphlet around the question of 'how to struggle against job cuts', which could be adapted for particular local cases.

an olive branch to the taliban?

>> continued from p.1

At the height of the outcry over the "Peace Jirga," the Taliban intensified their inhuman brutalities by killing school children, teachers, men, and women of Kabul and other cities, but Karzai and his spokesmen expressed with detestable indifference that, "Inshallah, with national unity soon we will emerge from these problems"! If their own sister, mother or daughter were raped, killed publicly or torn to pieces by suicide bombings, would they still call these killings "problems" they have with Taliban, their "disaffected brothers"?

But given the power-lust and impunity of the ruling mafia, they still do not call the Taliban criminals, and call their acts crimes, because despite having some differences, in the last analysis they regard themselves as from the same ranks and deem it necessary to unite in order to manage the state machinery in the face of the people's wrath.

As for the so-called intellectuals of Afghanistan who hope that the Taliban will end the US occupation... If such people are not fools, then surely they are spineless because they neither remember the marks of the Taliban flogging our mothers, sisters and fathers nor the beheading of our chil-

dren and poor women (in the name of rooting out "spies"), or the spraying of acid on innocent school-girls.

In the past, through the meddling of Zalmay Khalilzad and Hamid Karzai as representatives of the Union Oil Company of California, the US worked with the Taliban and pumped tens of millions of dollars into their pockets.

Today if the Taliban once again comes to power, the US will easily "work" with them and prefer their bloody and suffocating rule of Afghanistan to an independent, pro-democracy and pro-women's rights government, because the US counts on them as the most loyal group to safeguard its interests in the region.

Let the puppet mafia government of Karzai bring together all its agents in the "Peace Jirga" and similar ridiculous shows and by organising their fancy meetings, dance over the dead bodies of our innocent people.

But the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, alongside the aggrieved Afghan people, thinks that such deceitful games mean throwing salt on the wounds of our people, caught amidst the US/NATO bombings, insecurity, poverty, unemployment and desperation.

hackney community college needs a community fight

★ A report on the recent cuts by an hourly-paid ESOL teacher

Cuts and Compulsory Redundancies

Earlier this year 68 members of staff at Hackney Community College were issued with notification of possible redundancy. After two successful, solid strike days, negotiation and many voluntary redundancies there are now only a handful of people facing compulsory redundancy.

The two subject areas primarily still affected are ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and Plumbing. We have also lost a librarian, the only Spanish teacher, the person responsible for Equality and Diversity in the college, and many other valued colleagues. I am one of four Hourly Paid Workers in ESOL fighting redundancy.

Many staff at the college will not realise that we are still struggling for our jobs because the management has been on a propaganda offensive to make it appear that there are no job losses. Most recently they have artificially reduced the number of redundancies by issuing the hourly paid in ESOL with withdrawal of redundancy notices.

However, they didn't bother to inform our programme managers of this. The managers have timetabled for next year without us and have confirmed that there are no hours available. We now face a summer with no redundancy pay (because apparently we are not redundant), having already missed many job opportunities, uncertain about what to say to students and colleagues and starting the Summer feeling humiliated after a hellish process, during which we frequently received misleading information.

Impact on the Community

Have we lost our jobs because there is not enough work? No. Plumbing and ESOL are both oversubscribed courses with huge waiting lists. We are redundant because our courses and the students who enrol on them are not valued as they should be.

Part of the problem in ESOL is that the government does not want to be seen to be spending money on immigrants. Without ESOL class migrants risk isolation, problems accessing vital services, and even more barriers to finding



we should integrate the campaign against redundancies with defence of service provision

work. Cutting ESOL is racist and sexist - the vast majority of students attending ESOL courses are women.

One of the main things students say about ESOL is the need for English to allow them to support their children's learning, so they can be a part of their communities and (contrary to the views many hold of these learners) so they can work.

Further, the government thinks it can cut ESOL provision in FE and push it out into training agencies, charities and voluntary organisations - some of their provision will be excellent, much is not. Pay and conditions for workers is generally worse and teachers are isolated. They do not receive the support from other teachers, training, or any of the benefits of working in a collaborative atmosphere.

We cannot return to a time when ESOL is taught voluntarily. I have worked at Hackney college for 6 months and during that time have appreciated being in a team of highly skilled workers. Somewhere in this fight we need to talk about what we (teachers and students) want for education.

At a time of increased unemployment the government is slashing benefits and forcing single parents back into work (what work?) by the time their children are starting schools. So it makes no sense at all to cut a popular training course, like plumbing. Hackney residents will need to travel out of the borough to try their luck on oversubscribed courses at other colleges.

The borough already has high unemployment rates and desperately needs investment in education to give people on the dole the best chance of learning the new skills they need to transform their lives and work, if they can and want to.

The last thing Hackney needs is bigger class sizes, fewer course options, a massive hike in course fees and staff losing their jobs. We need more education opportunities, not less.

Where next?

There are undoubtedly more cuts to come and the chance of fighting does feel bleak. None of the public sector unions are doing enough. Here are few ideas that can be the start of a conversation about how we gear up collectively.

For many years at Hackney staff have taken a day's strike, often this has been to defend hourly paid workers. As hourly paid workers we are seen as the ultimate flexible workforce, to be picked up and dropped whenever management like. And as we work on zero hour contracts, they are right; they can pretty much do whatever they like. With urgency we need to challenge the casualisation of Further Education.

We also need to face the fact that we are going to have to strike for longer than a day or two to defend or win anything. I think this involves talking in our branches about what a union is and building democratic spaces where all workers feel they can contribute and where we push beyond the limits imposed by the top levels of the union. It's our union; we should take ownership of it. We should challenge the union bureaucracy for the outrageous spending on congress dinners and start using our union subs to support organising and strike funds. A motion condemning the spending at UCU Congress was successfully passed at The London Regional Conference just a couple of weekends ago and the same motion was passed at Hackney branch meeting last week with no abstentions - so this is being challenged. Finally, it is going to take more than industrial action to fight off the cuts to education. I think it is through the support of, and joint work with, the community that we will win.

We cannot wait till further cuts happen to start our fight back, we need to organise now as a community. If we want to defend what we have that is good in education, and build on it, we have a real fight ahead.

'unviable' courses after MMU cuts

by Mark Harrison

In November 2009, the management of Manchester Metropolitan University announced plans to shed 127 members of 'support staff' from their workforce; this follows a period of manifest 'natural wastage', which has left the library devoid of staff. Amongst students, those of the flagship art department will be hardest hit. Artists have complained that their courses will become 'unviable' with the loss of technicians and studio time.

The UNISON branch secretary made a firm verbal attack against management, highlighting the Vice Chancellor John Brooks' £250,000 annual salary and the 7% increase in his pay packet as well as the development of new sites by the university, a £1.3 million budget surplus for the year 2009-10 and the fact that the cuts were announced before Alistair Darling's 2010 budget. The union called for a vote of no-confidence in the VC whilst condemning a growth in the number of highly paid managers and "years of mismanagement".

Initially it appeared that strike action would be likely, union stewards called a number of demonstrations which were attended by hundreds of angry workers. Unfortunately anti-union laws and the trade union bureaucracy combined to diffuse the workers' anger. Due to the fact that the union had to hold three separate ballots, it was not until May, five



staff and students demonstrate against cuts: but a mandate for strike action was abandoned

months later that a vote for strike action was taken. This ballot returned a 53% 'yes' vote on a 50% turn out, enough for a strike, however regional full timers - who had earlier ordered that only official union reps could wield megaphones and that they must confiscate those brought by 'trouble makers' - did not allow the strike to go ahead.

There has also been a shocking lack of co-operation between trade unions at the neighbouring universities where cuts are also taking place. Nevertheless, management have seen this as an opportunity to do away with a number of union militants at MMU. They have repeatedly been refused

rooms in which to hold public meetings and have been told that their number of part time reps will be reduced from three to one. Management's aggressive tactics and the bullying culture they employ in the workplace paid off as a number of workers decided to jump ship and accept 'voluntary' redundancies.

The Students' Union, occupied by Labour, Liberal and Tory hacks was, unsurprisingly, passive. Despite Rob Boardman, president of the Union and a card carrying Labour member, commenting that as a member of a trade union he had his 'sympathies', he failed to come out in support of strike action.

By the end of the academic year the union had managed to negotiate the number of compulsory redundancies down to around eight people, doubtlessly supplemented by considerable voluntary redundancies. Of course this is only the beginning, a new onslaught on jobs is expected in the new year, which once successful will be followed by an attack on teaching staff.

The new academic year will also see a fresh set of 'indy green' types occupy the Students' Union executive and I think it will be important for socialists at MMU to pressure them into radical action.

See <http://tiny.cc/eq8co> for more info and to get involved in the student-worker anti-cuts coalition, the 'Manchester for Jobs and Education' campaign.

the cuts agenda and ‘social capital’

by Dave Spencer

When we are talking about building communism from below, we need to know our starting point – the state and the consciousness of the working class.

One of the greatest influences on the theory of this matter and on the consequent policies and actions of local government and of workers in the voluntary or “Third” sector is Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* (2000). In it Putnam introduces the term “social capital”. By this he means any type of social or community engagement whatsoever – formal, informal, to do with friends, work, the family, hobbies, faith, politics, sport, the community. In other words social capital refers to how society works at grass roots, street and community level.

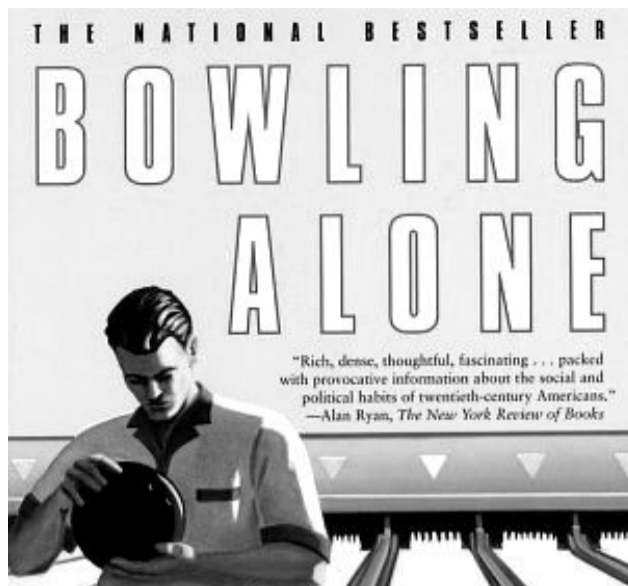
Putnam’s startling claim is that in the USA there has been a significant decline (45%) in every form of social capital and community engagement since 1975. This trend has accelerated since 1985. He states that the USA has lost one third of its civic infrastructure. Clearly the situation will be worse now in 2010, since the book was written in 2000.

If this is true and the results shown to be parallel in Britain, this means as far as the working class is concerned that a good deal of the possible alternative organisations to those of the state have disappeared. When it comes to fighting the cuts in public services many of the communities affected will not have organisations to fight back. The atomisation of the working class is growing apace.

Putnam makes the case that “social capital” is as equally necessary to the functioning of society as “physical capital” – the buildings and machinery needed for manufacture – and “human capital” – the educated, skilled and healthy work-force needed to operate the physical capital.

His argument is similar to what Dan Finn calls “the dual repertoire of reformism” or the policies of Old Labour. For example the Attlee government claimed that both the NHS and their policy of equal opportunities for all in Education were fundamental human rights and a pillar of socialism. On the other hand the policies were also very useful to employers because they gained an educated and healthy work-force at the expense of the state, thus improving productivity.

Putnam goes into great detail to prove his point. Visiting friends, families eating meals together, Cheers-type local bars, full-service restaurants, card-playing, sending greetings cards, talking to neighbours, playing a musical instrument – all have declined by as much as one third. The USA



robert putnam’s book looked at the decline of community

spends more on guns, dogs and locks to deter crime than it does on “social capital”.

To re-enforce his points Putnam quotes from studies made by the National Institute of Mental Health (USA) which conclude: “There has been a reduced integration of adults into the social structure.” Informal socialising, membership of organisations, church membership have all declined. This decline has had an adverse effect on individual mental health in the USA.

The main blame for falling social interaction, Putnam claims, is television. He points to a correlation between the amount of television viewed and civic disengagement. Television competes for scarce time. It produces lethargy and passivity in the individual, reduces the attention span and gives the illusion of companionship without any actual social interaction taking place. It boosts celebrities rather than discussion of social and community issues. Advertising encourages materialist values and individual consumption. The spectatorship of sport has increased through television at the same time as involvement at grass roots level in sporting clubs and teams has decreased markedly. In party politics, party finances have increased and therefore so have regular paid workers who can spin the propaganda on television but party activists are very thin on the ground.

Putnam does not mention the more recent phenomena of the internet and mobile phones. It would be interesting to

research the effects of these on actual face to face social engagement and on mental health.

It has to be said that Putnam’s message has generally been accepted as correct New Labour has put money into funding schemes and voluntary organisations in “deprived areas”. Even the Tory Iain Duncan Smith and his “Centre for Social Justice” seem to go along with the argument that “social capital” needs to be supported by government and aspects of the idea have already crept into speeches by the spokespeople for the coalition. The buzz phrase in the public sector are policies and actions that lead to “community cohesion”.

Clearly there are contradictions in these various policies and actions and these will become very apparent during the proposed cuts in public services. The notion of “social capital” is directly the opposite of the Thatcherite “There is no such thing as society” and “I’m alright Jack, pull up the ladder”. How the Tories will cope with this is far from clear.

As far as New Labour are concerned there have been a number of criticisms of their policies. One is paternalism where funds have been used to buy off communities. A friend of mine who was part of a voluntary women’s group in an estate reported that the Council had “piloted a University chick in to manage the group full-time. Of course it was to put the lid on us!” And so it proved to be and the project ended in disaster.

On the other hand a few years ago I did some research evaluating the government’s Adult and Community Learning Fund which ran from 1998 to 2004. I went all over the country visiting projects and was surprised by how much creative and inspiring work was going in the most unlikely places by people really committed to change. Some people of course had not got a clue and were treading water just for the funding but basically the results were very good. I also did some evaluation of Educational Action Zones and the same was true. Situations can be transformed by some dedicated people with some funding. There have been some successful attempts to maintain or increase social capital and it would be a disaster if this whole experience were wiped out by the cuts.

The cuts in public services will have a direct effect on communities and will escalate any breaking down of what civic infrastructure remains. Putnam’s argument stands in the way of the cuts and will of course lead to dispute. The Coalition will need a new set of ideas for public sector workers to put in its place. The old Thatcherite ones will not be enough.

the national health service: a tarnished jewel

★ Terry Liddle argues for defence of the NHS but also awareness of its failings.

Being a baby boomer, I was one of the first children to be born in the new era of the National Health Service Later when I became an active socialist, I often heard it called the jewel in the crown of socialism. Having suffered a near fatal heart in 2004, I have had considerable recent experience of hospitals and now consider the jewel severely tarnished and at the very least in need of a good polishing; if not resetting entirely.

The first point of contact with the NHS is usually one’s GP. If one is dissatisfied with the service they provide is a far from easy process finding a new one given the shortage of GPs in many areas. When I complained to my GP about chest pains, I was told not to worry its only indigestion and to take some antacid tablets. Within a couple of weeks I was flat on my back in hospital having suffered a heart attack.

I later discovered the same doctor had misdiagnosed a neighbour’s mother’s cancer. My son’s GP misdiagnosed his breathing problems as angina. She was later struck off! Later when my son developed mental health problems caused by the failure of the benefits system to process his claim properly, I was told the only way he could get help was by committing a serious crime.

The relationship between GPs and the drug monopolies is near incestuous, hardly surprising considering the perks on offer. Often a GP’s dialogue with a patient will be: “Good morning. What’s wrong with you? Here is a prescription!” Only doctors can prescribe, most nurses and paramedics are not allowed to even if a patient is in great pain. Because

of this relationship, GPs will dismiss alternative and complementary forms of medication.

Hospitals are the last place to go if you are ill. When I was in the Queen Elizabeth II hospital in Woolwich there was a considerable amount of dust and discarded dressings under my bed. When I asked about this I was told the cleaners, cleaning is done by private contractors, has neither the time nor an incentive, they are on little more than minimum wage, to do the job properly. Alcohol based germ killers may stop infection, but proper cleanliness would be a vast improvement.

Privacy in hospital consists of a curtain which can be drawn round the bed. The space in which the bed, a chair and a cabinet were packed was less than that of a prison cell. There is never total darkness or total quiet and at times it is impossible to sleep. The only people who could sleep well were the night nurses who were often doing 60 hours a week in shifts. It was obvious that many of them were worked to a point of exhaustion where they could no longer do the job properly. It is so too with the junior doctors.

One gets little or no control over the amount or nature of the treatment one gets. It’s a case of take it or leave it. One is prescribed drugs without being told what they do or of any possible side effects. Often these are worse than the problem they are meant to address.

From the QEII I was moved to St Thomas’s. Many of the tests done in Woolwich were done again there, it seems the doctors at both hospitals don’t get on. Eventually, I had a pacemaker fitted. (This was meant to last a decade, but started to run down after five years). I collapsed in the local High Street on 1st April 2009.

When it came round to discharge time I was still very weak. Had it not been for the generosity of friends who ordered a taxi, I would have had major problems in getting home. Once home I applied to Greenwich Social Services for help with domestic chores like shopping and cleaning. I was turned down. Had my ex-wife not helped, I would have starved!

I have marched miles in defence of the NHS and against hospital closures, but I feel I am trying to defend the indefensible. There is an urgent need for qualitative change. There has to be far more emphasis on preventative medicine. GPs have to be made far more accountable to their patients. The power of the drug monopolies has to be broken, there has to be a system of public ownership under workers control.

Conditions in hospitals have to be vastly improved, all services such as cleaning and catering should be in house. Pay and conditions for nurses and junior doctors must be brought in line with other public sector jobs. Patients need far more control over the treatment they receive.

While what is may be better than the workhouse, charity or private insurance schemes it is not good enough. Since its inception in the 1940s, the Welfare State has been increasing control over every aspect of life and just enough welfare to ensure the wage slaves can go to work, or look for work, in the morning.

We have to fight for something far better. In this we can draw inspiration from the healthcare facilities provided in mining communities by the union or those provided by Dr Salter and the Labour council in Bermondsey in the early 20th century. We have to work on a programme for what health care could be like in a communist society.

the EDL and the

★ Last month the English Defence League announced plans to march in Tower Hamlets, East London, in protest at an Islamist conference planned for June 20th at the Troxy centre. The conference was planned by groups tied to Islamic Forum Europe, among the major Islamist groups in the area.

Anti-racists planned to demonstrate against the EDL: but the SWP-run Unite Against Fascism and its front group United East End insisted this should be on the basis of uncritical support for — and collaboration with — the conference organisers. This meant whitewashing the worst religious fundamentalists and supporting their right to represent the Bengali community in the borough.

While the conference was ultimately cancelled by the Troxy centre, and the EDL abandoned their march, UAF held their demo regardless. Here local Bengali secular activist Ansar Ahmed Ullah reflects on the episode.

What is Islamic Forum Europe?

In 1971, during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, there were widespread killings of the civilians and other atrocities were carried out by the occupying Pakistani forces and their local collaborators.

The collaborators were local Islamist groups, namely Jamaat-e-Islam, Nezam-e-Islam and the Muslim League.

Soon after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 some of the alleged Jamaat-e-Islami war criminals fled Bangladesh and took refuge in various Arab countries, Pakistan and the UK. A Channel 4 Dispatches programme aired on 1995 exposed such 3 alleged war criminals.

The IFE was set up by one such alleged war criminal in 1989 to disguise their past crimes and fundamentalist ideology.

What was your reaction when the EDL announced their plans to march and UAF planned its counter-demo?

The entry of the English Defence League into Tower Hamlets to protest against the meeting was a direct provocation to stir up racial tensions, foment dissent among faiths and attempt to bring disunity amongst the communities of the borough. We condemned the fascist EDL whose sole objective is to act as storm troopers for the British National Party and pick up the pieces for them after their miserable rout in the local and national elections in neighbouring Barking and Dagenham Council.

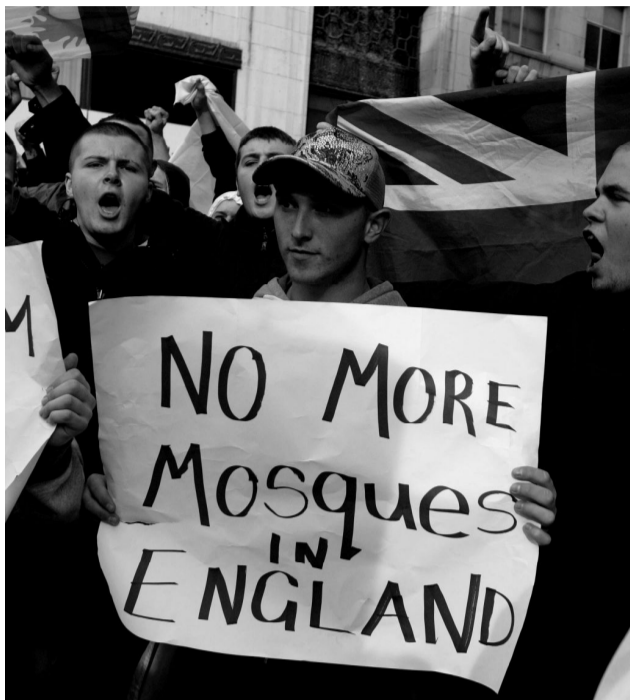
However, we are also opposed to fundamentalism and so had watched with growing concern the way in which the United East End coalition become a hub for legitimising the base of Jamaat-e-Islami activists in the borough. We had questioned how and why the Islamic Forum Europe came to occupy such a central place in the mobilisations.

We believe that fascism and fundamentalism should be challenged equally.

They are both right wing forces growing in strength and numbers within local areas, and any campaign against the right wing should encompass an active stand against both fascism and religious fundamentalism.

We continue to oppose the EDL unconditionally but we also do not want to be involved in anything that consolidates the power base of IFE in this way.

We in the Bengali and the Muslim community were being asked to stand side by side with the most reactionary, far right, anti-Bengali, Anti-Hindu, Anti-Jewish, fundamentalist group, IFE. This we refused to do. The IFE does not represent the Muslim community in Tower Hamlets nor do they



the thuggish english defence league street gangs are a threat to all muslims

uphold the glorious tradition of Cable Street, Altab Ali (murdered by racists in 1978) and the anti-racist movement.

Under the patronage of an exclusivist Wahhabi Islam emanating from Saudi Arabia they are attempting to impose it amongst the Bengalis in the borough. Just as the EDL takes the guise of being ordinary English citizens to hide their true identity of fronting the fascist BNP, so do IFE act as the sole representatives of ordinary Muslims but are in fact operating under the direction of their parent organisation Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh.

What effect did this episode have on the Bengali community?

It is hard to say what threat the EDL posed because they do not exist in Tower Hamlets: but whatever the threat the Bengali community is able to defend itself.

The Bengali community has a long tradition of resisting racists from the 1970s to 1990s. Racism has to be fought on many fronts, socially with the local white working class, politically with alliances with other progressive anti-racist parties, institutionally and in unison with all communities.

The cancellation of the Troxy event was a victory for secular forces and those who are opposed to fundamentalism. The majority of Bengalis are secular, (in the South Asian sense, not necessarily opposed to religion but against religious persecution). Like any other community, the Bengali community has many factions based on ideology, class, region, profession and party political lines. But a sense of community does exist when it comes to the greater welfare of the whole Bengali community.

Why have Islamist groups become influential in Tower Hamlets, and why do the left associate with them?

By the 1990s another key development was the increasing importance of religion, in the case of Bengalis, Islam. This was partly due to New Labour government association of faith in its agenda.

In addition, in the weeks after 11th September 2001, with the prospect of a US-led war in Afghanistan, the Stop the War Coalition was founded in London, bringing together a number of organisations, the largest of which was the Socialist Workers Party and more importantly MAB (Muslim Association of Britain) associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and MCB (Muslim Council of Britain) its leadership associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami. The inclusion of MAB & MCB enabled the mobilisation thousands of Muslims, including the young, to get involved in the anti-war movement. This ensured for the first time that large numbers of third generation Muslims took part in global political campaigns.

The MCB-linked Jamaat-e-Islami is the largest Islamist political party of the Indian sub-continent, that operates under various charities and religious organisations centred around the East London's biggest mosque. Its activists have managed to infiltrate all the major political parties including the Respect Party that came out of SWP-MCB partnership.

The SWP under the banner of Stop the War Coalition and Respect Party has been working with Islamist groups. This wasn't surprising as in 1994, Chris Harman, one of the SWP's chief ideologists argued that the party should make common cause on the issue of "anti-imperialism" with Islamist movements, in part as a way of recruiting their members.

George Galloway's victory in the 2005 General Election in the Bethnal Green and Bow area was seen as a protest against the Labour Party's foreign policy. But it also demonstrated the strength of the Islamists within the community and the dramatic shift in British politics when it came to securing the support of Muslim voters. It reaffirmed that global issues were prioritised in the Islamist agenda and when it came to appeal to the Bengali voters, the 'Muslim' sentiment was the focus of the election campaign.

We must challenge those who advocate the racialisation of politics.

what IFE says

Whitechapel Anarchist Group found these quotes from the speakers billed to speak at the Islamic Forum Europe conference:

Aba Usamah – “If I were to call homosexuals perverted, dirty, filthy dogs who should be murdered, that's my freedom of speech, isn't it?”

Suhaib Hassan – “If once – just once – an adulterer is stoned, no one would commit this crime.” “Even though cutting off the hands and feet, or flogging the drunkard and fornicator, seem to be very abhorrent, once they are implemented, they become a deterrent for the whole society. This is why in Saudi Arabia, for example, where these measures are implemented, the crime rate is very, very, low”

Yusuf Estes on wife beating – “Sheik Yusuf Estes... moved to the subject of disobedient wives, First, “tell them.” Second, “leave the bed.” Finally: “Roll up a newspaper and give her a crack. Or take a yardstick, something like this, and you can hit.”

Haitham Al Haddad – a supporter of the niqab/burkha “Do Muslim men force their women to adorn the Niqab? I would advise the women in my family to adhere to Islamic dress code because it is a call for righteousness.”

Hussain Yee – a fan of wife beating “A Muslim man doesn't have a right to beat his wife in anger or in order to injure. But you can do it if you do it in love, out of consideration,” and a virulent anti-Semite who thinks ‘the Jews’ did 9/11 and alleges of ‘the Jews’ – “If they want to kill, they kill, because they believe that they are the chosen people. They are children of God. The blood that flows in the body of the Jew is the blood of God. It is holy. And the blood that is not Jewish, they are all like animals, you can kill them and they don't feel that it is a sin.”

Murtaza Khan “The fornicating woman and the fornicating man, flog them 100 times. The sharia says flog them 100 times and to send them out of the land for one year...Why is the punishment for a married individual more harsher than for a young man, or a man who has not been married before, etcetera, or a woman. It's because the married man has that form of release. And the woman as well. So the punishment for them becomes stoning to death.”

islamist far-right

the day the EDL didn't show up

by Richard Price

As soon as the English Defence League (EDL) announced they would march, left wing and community activists in Tower Hamlets started to organise against them: but Unite Against Fascism (UAF) said we should be criticising the EDL alone.

When trade unionists argued we should link it with opposing cuts they were shouted down, and when socialists and anarchists from the likes of Feminist Fightback, Whitechapel Anarchist Group, The Commune and Workers' Liberty argued we should oppose all bigotry, they were accused of racism. So instead of a general community demonstration against bigotry a group was launched, United East End, under the thumb of UAF who called a demo on the same day.

Meanwhile, Tower Hamlets council, fresh from the wipe out of Respect and IFE (who had controlled a large number of Respect and Labour councillors) at the May election, got the Troxy Centre, the venue, to sign up to its 'Anti-Hate Crime Agenda', and on the basis of that the Troxy pulled the conference with a week to go. Immediately the EDL, its job done – whether that be anti-Islamism or simply shit- stirring – pulled their demo: the council asked United East End/UAF to do likewise but they refused.

In the days before the demo the situation was increasingly wound up by the EDL, a dozen of who decided to have a drink in a pub by Whitechapel Tube: they elicited a massive reaction from local youth in minutes and had to be rapidly escorted back down the tube.

But it is also crucial here to understand that both UAF and IFE, like the EDL, had an interest in winding up local youth, as they all operate opportunistic political strategies based on recruiting from troubled situations. IFE, the night of the EDL incursion, sent around texts saying Bangla women were being attacked and raped. UAF put out, continually and dishonestly – as they must have known otherwise – that thousands of EDL were going to descend on Whitechapel and that their real target was the East London Mosque (ELM).

More progressively, a couple of days before the event a Unity Platform Against Racism and Fascism of Bangla organisations like the Bangladesh Welfare Association put out a statement attacking the fascism of the IFE and arguing there was no basis for unity against fascism with the IFE, a group who were the descendents of the Islamist death squads who had murdered tens of thousands of Bangla nationalists and socialists in their 1971 War of Liberation against Pakistan.

The UAF reacted by accusing the supporters of this statement of racism. Actually it is deeply racist of the UAF and its supporters to treat all Bangladeshis as having the same politics and are not able being able to identify the fascists in their own ranks.

On the day of the march maybe 5,000 arrived at Stepney Green for a march to Altab Ali Park, itself named after a young Bangla worker murdered by racists in 1978. The vast majority of them were male Bangla youth, with no more than a few dozen white leftists.

At the start the wound-up crowd shouted down a council spokesman and later cheered the inflammatory opportunism of George Galloway, who was recently humiliated in the Bow election. Almost immediately, believing the EDL to be in Whitechapel, several hundred youth broke through police lines and ran to Whitechapel but found – surprise, surprise – no EDL.



although the english defence league failed to turn out in tower hamlets on june 20th, unite against fascism held a 5,000 strong protest rally, which was addressed by various self-appointed 'community leaders' and religious figures as well as a smattering of trade unionists

There were EDL in London that day; about 20 had shouted outside the Hilton on Edgware Road, where the Troxy meeting had decamped, and then gone to Whitehall to support the demonstration of One Law For All (OLFA), an anti-Sharia group based on various Iranian communists and UK libertarians, and opposed on this day by Al Muhajiroun and Muslims Against Crusades (MAC). Attempting to attack the MAC demo they were quickly arrested and taken away.

The 300 youth decided then to march all the way into London to confront the EDL: who, by the time they arrived, were long gone. Though most on this breakaway march were non religious, elements were and they had wound up the youth so when they arrived in Whitehall they shouted at the OLFA as if they were the EDL. Later they were pushed by the police to join the MAC group and while some did, most were not interested.

Back at the East London Mosque, after the main march had gone, the left had disappeared, though a couple of UAF organisers were in and out of the ELM. Whitechapel Anarchist Group had long argued the real danger to youth comes from the police (along with poor housing and work) and had stationed themselves near the ELM all day and handed out thousands of Bust Cards with legal information to the youth, which proved very popular.

Unsurprisingly, around 5pm the police attacked the hundreds of youth, who were still in the area, believing the EDL were on the way: but, receiving a firm response, pretty well withdrew from the streets.

The day showed that Bangladeshi youth, while they will not take any shit from anyone, have been lied to by so many people they do not know what to believe - just like the rest of the working class. But critically it summed up the collapse and bankruptcy of a left who, incapable of relating to and organising around people's everyday interests survive, by opportunism, by winding up youth, by lying and by working with those whose interests are diametrically opposed to working class power like the IFE.

The response of WAG, and other independent left, supporters on that day, to defend their immediate area, and to support local youth against any attack, was the most mature: a community response that was needed in the whole of Tower Hamlets that day. It is as united working class communities we will stop those who seek to divide us on ethnicity and religion, as do the BNP and IFE, but also those attacks from the neo-liberal state.

★Full version and references on our website www.thecommune.co.uk

the united front against fascism

a new pamphlet by Joe Thorne

In 1946, Tony Cliff, who was later to found the Socialist Workers Party, described the Muslim Brotherhood – an international, ultra-conservative, Sunni political movement – as “clerical-fascist”

Yet in 2010, SWP members describe any criticism of particular Muslim figures, or Islamic political tendencies, much more conservative than the Muslim Brotherhood as “Islamophobic”.

This is being used, in effect, as a tactic to subdue, intimidate, and silence critical voices within the Tower Hamlets labour movement, and within local community politics, who object to the SWP's uncritical alliance with some of the most marginal and reactionary elements amongst Muslims. How did this come about?

To answer this question, it is necessary to understand how the SWP sees the theory of the “united front” — that is the theory of how revolutionaries should work politically with others.

This pamphlet seeks to explain the failings of the SWP strategy and its divergence from the tradition the SWP claims to uphold, that of the “united front” approach advocated by Leon Trotsky and the early Communist International.

The purpose of this is not insist on orthodoxy: the popular practice of whitewashing Trotsky, ignoring the concretely counterrevolutionary aspects of his theory and practice, is unnecessary and damaging.

Rather, the pamphlet seeks to demonstrate the SWP's lack of any meaningful alternative strategy and thus their willingness to jump into bed with all sorts of bourgeois politicians and reactionary forces in the name of ‘the united front’.

£1 + 50p postage per copy. Order using form on page 12

‘some past rank and file mo

by Sheila Cohen

Bryan Pearce's 1959 article 'Some Past Rank and File Movements'[1] is an intriguing piece, not only because of its date during a period of relative quiescence in the labour movement but also because it puts its finger on almost every issue that currently confronts today's perhaps even more quiescent – or at least less powerful – working class.

Paradoxically, the piece begins with two *de rigueur* quotes from Leon Trotsky which in turn muddy two of the central points Pearce's account later indicates. This is largely because of the conflation which Trotsky, like so many other writers, makes between trade unionism in its aspect as organiser of class resistance and as bureaucratic institution through - again like almost every other writer in the field - referring to both aspects under the same rubric. Thus: "The trade unions of our time can either serve as secondary instruments of imperialist capitalism for the subordinating and disciplining of workers... or, on the contrary, the trade unions can become the instruments of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat..."

The second quote does the same thing, and commits the further error of assuming that it is possible, indeed worthwhile, to "strive... to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, boldly and resolutely... advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries..." Although Trotsky does also call for the creation of "independent militant organisations", anyone who has witnessed the transformation of union leaders like Billy Hayes or even a Bob Crow or Mark Serwotka (both of whom, as recently publicised, earn six-figure salaries at least five times as high as their members') can seriously accept the first of the two suggestions.

But enough of poor old Trotsky, as an ex-comrade of mine used to call him. We go on to summarise the main points of Pearce's overview before turning to conclusions for today.

Bureaucratisation

This seems almost too obvious to be worth pointing out, but Pearce's account is lively (if almost entirely "sociological"). Dating the rise of an observable layer of trade union bureaucrats to the late nineteenth century, though the "Defence not Defiance" logo of the early ASE engineering union thirty years previously might be thought to presage the phenomenon, Pearce provides us with a number of vivid quotes from Beatrice and Sidney Webb and other authors, e.g.: "Nowadays the salaried officer of a great union is courted and flattered by the middle class... He is asked to dine with them [and moves to a more middle-class suburb]. The move leads to him dropping his workmen friends; and his wife changes her acquaintances..." etc.

Fred Knee of the Compositors remarked famously in 1910 that "there are some trade union leaders who are so prosperous that they at any rate have in their own persons achieved the harmony of the classes", while Beatrice Webb provides a hilarious description of the 1915 TUC: "The leading men have grown fatter in body and more dully complacent in mind... the 'old hands know... that [the TUC] is more of an 'outing' than a gathering for the transaction of working-class affairs. What the delegates enjoy is a joke... Indignation... is felt to be out of place... I listened to two officials over their big cigars in the hotel lounge... 'The wages are... perfectly scandalous' [said one]. It was the largeness of the... earnings, it appeared, they were complaining of..." That Beatrice Webb, the Polly Toynbee of her time, should be as critical is some indication of the depths to which bureaucraticisation had reached.

‘Labour Unrest’

By this time, however, as the date of Webb's comment indicates, other forces were at large in the land. A huge wave of working-class struggle lasting from 1910 to 1914 had recently been unleashed; while brought to a screeching halt by the war, this resumed very shortly afterwards in the more organised form of the Workers' Committee movement. For our purposes, the explosion of the "Great Unrest", as the 1910-14 strike wave was known, illustrates a tendency as fundamental in one direction as the phenomenon of bureaucraticisation is in the other; the irreducible, ineradicable, unpredictable resurgence of working-class struggle.

Like many upsurges, the Great Unrest followed on some years of apparent weakness and apathy reminiscent of some aspects of our own period; a recent rereading of *The Ragged Trousers Philanthropists* brought home to me the similarity between the fatalistic pessimism of the low-paid building worker "philanthropists" and similar weakly-



postal workers protest outside the house of commons: but some of their union's leaders fancy getting a seat on the inside

organised workers today. Yet *RTP* was written only a few years before the Great Unrest mobilised many equally low-paid sections such as railway workers and dockers. The logic of Pearce's interest as a socialist in rank and file movements is of course in this grassroots, ground-up self-activity by so-called "ordinary workers".

Syndicalism

Yet workers' movements were not to remain "spontaneous". Although revolutionary politics had, of course, by now emerged and become enshrined in organisations like the BSP and, at a wider level, the Second International and its Leninist critique, a more influential slant on these early 20th century struggles was that of syndicalism. While almost impossible to precisely define, the bundle of ideas and theories coming under this heading included a clear anti-parliamentarianism and, in its "anarcho" dimension, an antipathy to party-building of any kind.

Syndicalism was no more than marginally influential among "ordinary" workers swept up in the struggle – one interesting study of the Singer strike of 1911 shows the female strikers only briefly beguiled by syndicalist ideas before reverting to more immediate goals – but it did have a strong effect on the thinking of the working-class vanguard with, as Pearce shows, often disastrous results: "The National Guilds Movement enjoyed a brief but deadly vogue..." Key policies such as amalgamation have now been shown, of course, to have been historically limited, while syndicalism's focus on trade unions *per se* as somehow forming future structures for a post-capitalist world, alongside the related and equally illusory enthusiasm for "encroaching control" ensured syndicalism's subordination to the more effective "Workers' Committee" approach of the Clyde and elsewhere during First World War struggles.

Direct Democracy

There were, however, two crucial aspects of syndicalism which deserve more lasting credit. One was its perhaps stumbling but eventually explicit recognition of the pointlessness of Trotsky's advice about "advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries". As Pearce recounts, referring to the famous pamphlet *The Miners' Next Step*, which was brought out in 1912 by the Unofficial Reform Committee of South Wales miners active in some of the most major strikes of the Great Unrest, "The remedy [to leadership betrayals] was not to be found in a mere change of leaders, for former agitators who became leaders went the same way as those they supplanted." In an interesting if ironic example of this syndrome, Pearce points out that exactly this happened to one of the pamphlet's co-authors, miners' leader A.J. Cook!

Yet the crucial insight into what appears to be an *almost* inevitable process (for a possible alternative strategy see below under Rank and file movements today) is provided in the pamphlet's recognition that "All leaders become corrupt, in spite of their own good intentions. No man was ever good enough, brave enough or strong enough [to resist this]." And so say all of us.

Workplace Organisation

This, too, is a definitional component of effective working-class organisation. One issue which has largely faded from today's discussions of trade union organisation and effectiveness is the notion of workplace branches – one which, by contrast, was a key concern of syndicalism. As Pearce notes, "In the early stages of trade unionism the branch had largely coincided with the place of work, but with the expansion of the unions a territorial basis for branch membership had been established... The militants believed that organisation on the basis of the workshop made for greater effectiveness of the unions as fighting machines- and less atomisation of the rank and file..." The militants were right.

Interestingly, the one element missing from the extensive if bureaucraticising reforms introduced by the 1974 Labour government under its notorious "Social Contract" – Equal Pay Act, Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act, Health and Safety at Work Act and the rest – was any right to hold meetings in the workplace in works time. Now *that* might have made some difference.

But the issue of workplace branches, the absence of which has contributed to the "apathy" and low attendance the Tories were able to cite in their alleged introduction of "democracy" into trade unionism with the 1984 act, has almost completely disappeared from discussion – rather like the contested question of "check-off", once fiercely resisted by militants because of its institutionalisation of dues collection, then equally fiercely defended when the Tories tried to take it away... But we digress.

Revolutionary Implications

While, as Pearce points out, the syndicalists' antipathy to leadership resulted in the stultifying of action during the First World War workers' committee period (see below), the political implications of the Great Unrest strikes went well beyond either their or the workers' conscious intentions. As Trotsky beautifully puts it, "The vague shadow of revolution hovered over Britain in those days..." The rest of the quote is devoted to trade union leaders' masterful efforts to subdue struggle in the face of this "threat", but the point stands and retains its crucial significance in the face of all-too-frequent dismissals of "economistic" working-class struggles on the part of many on the left. As Daniel Singer points out when discussing neo-liberalism, "For capital, victory could only be consolidated by changing its relations with labour..." – and the reverse applies in terms of labour's irrefutable *centrality* to the project of social transformation. The consistent respect of rank and file syndicalists for the political value of working-class self-activity deserves acknowledgement in this context.

Workers' Committees... or Soviets?

Nevertheless, the political weaknesses of syndicalism as detailed above stand out further by contrast to the briefly outstanding potential of workers' committee structures of the Shop Stewards' Movement during the First World War. As chronicled more extensively in James Hinton's valuable

Movements’... and the future?

study, these committees bore during their brief lifetime all the hallmarks of the *soviet* form of organisation soon to flower into revolution in Russia: direct democracy, committee-based delegate structures, accountability and revocability of delegates. Hinton’s account emphasises the crucial element of working-class *independence* of both ruling class and union bureaucracy stemming from this form of organisation: ‘Because of their delegatory character these committees were capable of initiating and carrying through strike action independent of the trade union officials. It is this independence that primarily defines the rank-and-file movement.’

In fact, perhaps one of the most historically significant statements of working-class democracy in terms of its essential independence from institutional trade unionism is that contained in an obscure Clyde Workers’ Committee leaflet of an unspecified date in 1915: ‘We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of Delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule or law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers.’

Pearce records a “contemporary observer” describing the shop stewards’ movement as embodying “at once the demand for greater autonomy for the rank-and-file workers as against the control of the central official, and for more effective organisation against the power of the employer” - demands which “are not easily separable for the second may depend largely on the first”. The connection pointed out here is *crucial* to the understanding of the class potential of trade unionism. And yet...

Class Coherence and Coordination – Not

Had the model of the Clyde Workers’ Committee, later “exported” to Sheffield during the city-wide strike to bring back a skilled worker who had been compulsorily conscripted, been sustained and consciously spread in a strategy of class unity, the “vague shadow of revolution” evoked by Trotsky might have become a veritable storm cloud. Much of this, of course, was blocked by the bureaucracy whose terrified stepping back from the “abyss” of class warfare is well illustrated by the famous Lloyd George speech in which the Welsh wizard – at that time Prime Minister – challenged them with the “constitutional implications” of activating the Triple Alliance in that revolutionary year of 1919.

Yet, as so often, even more subversive working-class leaders lacked a conscious strategy of class-wide unity: as Pearce notes, “All through the years 1916-18 there was a succession of strikes in one centre after another... in every case led by unofficial groups. But there was little coordination between these actions. Thus, the engineers’ strike which began in Rochdale in May 1917 and spread rapidly, did not affect such important centres as Clydeside and Tyneside.”

Given the “revolutionary” tenor of the times, this may seem extraordinary. Yet such lack of coordination has been present in other eras of major working-class activity such as the upsurge of 1968-74. The question of an effective coordinating body will be discussed in our conclusions. Pearce does note that (as observed earlier) that when a national leadership of the various shop stewards’ committees and amalgamation movements finally came into being in August 1917, it was “hamstrung by the syndicalist prejudice against any kind of effective leadership...” It was also, as described in more detail by Hinton, derailed by employer bribes and the continuing rift between skilled and less skilled workers.

As Pearce notes, despite the still-exceptional level of class struggle, by 1922-23 “a succession of industrial defeats, especially ‘Black Friday’ in 1921 when the Triple Alliance showed its true worth... had smashed what remained of the war-time shop stewards’ movement and compelled the militants to start painfully building up again almost from scratch.”

Resurgence – From Below

While the influence of the Communist Party (founded in 1921) and the Comintern was initially positive, resulting in a renewed attempt to unify struggle through the class-wide Minority Movement, this initiative collapsed within a short period into a Comintern-influenced homage to “left bureaucrats” which led indirectly to the massive defeat of the General Strike, or at least of any effective opposition to the bureaucrats’ betrayal.

From then on, Pearce’s account becomes uniformly depressing, with one stellar exception – the London Busmen’s

Rank and File Movement. This unofficial initiative, which had nothing to do with the increasingly distorted machinations of the CP as it snaked its way through the “Third Period” and after, arose in the way that all successful rank-and-file organisations arise – from, indeed, the ranks. While the question of what a rank-and-file movement actually *is* discussed further in the next section, there is one irreducible component, and one illustrated in the morale-boosting story of the London busmen – the generation of grass roots conflict by structural factors of exploitation and labour intensification.

The busmen had certain things in their favour, as Pearce points out – for one thing, a workplace-based branch (see above), for another the official union Central Bus Committee on which the militants “automatically” obtained a majority. Yet without the initial spur of dissatisfaction with both wages and conditions, and with the union officials’ handling of them, no rank and file organisation would have been necessary. Almost all “spontaneous”, workplace-based forms of resistance are generated by this toxic mix – as the sad story of the sabotage of sociology by “*embourgeoisified*” workers at the Vauxhall Luton factory demonstrates (see my article in issue 15 of *The Commune*). Without going into any more details at this point, we can also refer to the rise of the Busmen’s Rank and File Movement as an example of both the *unpredictability* and *resurgence* that are characteristic of rank and file trade union activity.

When is a Rank and File Movement not a Rank and File Movement?

But what do we mean by the “rank and file”? And what is a “rank and file movement” – of the past or, indeed, present?

Richard Hyman, in an influential 1979 article in which he postulated the growth of *workplace* trade union bureaucracy, repudiated the notion of the rank and file as “no more than a military metaphor”, noting also that shop stewards are often included in this category and yet be, as his argument suggests, drawn into the bureaucracy.

While Hyman did indeed note a highly problematic trend, with the growing provision during the 1970s of workplace union offices and facilities, “away-days” with management etc, our argument here suggests an entirely valid use for the term “rank and file” – from a *class* point of view. In so far as workplace representatives are linked to, accountable to and most of all *part* of their “constituency”, in terms of remaining with them as a worker working alongside those they represent, the problem of workplace bureaucratisation is amenable to this class solution. The issue is how far shop stewards and other workplace reps *recognise* this dynamic and therefore take explicit steps to avoid it – and this is an issue of class education very little understood within the movement today.

There is little more to be said here about Pearce’s analysis, which culminates simply in a warning, still pertinent in 1959, of “the need for rank and file movements, and the fatal consequences of allowing the Communist Party to get control of such movements”. Another word might today be substituted for “Communist” in that sentence – but enough of that, for now. The issue that needs investigating at this point, and which Pearce’s analysis does not explicitly take up, is of the (potentially) dual nature of “rank and file movements” of his period and of ours – those which arise “spontaneously” from worker discontent, as in the case of the Great Unrest movements and, more prosaically, the London busmen, and those more deliberately created by conscious socialist organisations.

While the latter variety, from the First World War Shop Stewards’ and Workers’ Committee Movement to the Minority Movement and beyond, normally arises, like the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) and the International Socialists’ Rank and File Movement of more recent times, during periods of widespread unrest, it is clearly a different phenomenon from the more spontaneous grass roots movements discussed above. During the Great Unrest, while syndicalists and socialists were heavily involved, they did not create a deliberate network aimed at linking up all examples of organisation and struggle, as the Minority Movement did during its brief non-“trade union lefts” moment. This contrast in perspective, and the political issues it raises, bring us to the situation confronting socialists today.

And Today?

2010, while precisely one hundred years after the uprisings of the Great Unrest, has yet to display anything as inspiring

– although, of course, you never know. The adage “A week is a long time in politics” must be taken seriously by the revolutionary left as well as the working class. 2009 did, of course, see a very brief mini-upsurge of factory and school occupations, as well as the subversive and highly effective unofficial strikes by engineering construction workers, which burst through the anti-union laws without a scratch. But what if the Great Unrest, Mark II, did burst on to the scene?

In principle, the prognosis looks good. We have leading trade union General Secretaries who are self-declared revolutionaries – Bob Crow, Mark Serwotka, Brian Caton and (perhaps) Matt Wrack. All lead sections of workers from whom industrial action could mean widespread disruption. But, as we all know, these leaders are obliged – by current laws and also by their own various awarenesses of the “abyss” syndrome – to pull their punches away from class-wide and sustained industrial action. We have also recently had publicised the massive salaries of these people, which must make Fred Knee’s observation only too relevant to our times.

Another potentially positive development is the foundation, originally sparked by a chance remark from Bob Crow, of a National Shop Stewards’ Network. The most valuable aspect of this organisation is that it was set up *before* an upsurge, thus potentially allowing a consciously independent and accountable leadership to be built within the working class ready to consciously turn any upturn in struggle in a revolutionary direction. I leave the discussion to generate the “but’s in this situation – they are related, however, to my earlier remark about today’s version of Brian Pearce’s warning about the Communist Party.

However, one point is more than worth making in this context. Sharp-eyed readers may have observed that I referred to the necessary in-class leadership as turning the struggle in a revolutionary direction. But workplace reps are not revolutionaries, it might be objected. The answer to that point is a complex and dialectical one taking into account rapid changes of consciousness in a situation of accelerated struggle, the *objectively* subversive implications of such struggle (the “abyss” point) and, above all, the revolutionary *responsibilities* of the revolutionary left.

In a moment of despair during a pointless discussion of what “we” (the left) should be doing, during which justified criticism of the trade union bureaucracy was voiced, I complained during the break to a friendly sectarian that it was the left which was largely to blame for its own frustrations. He looked at me in puzzlement and commented: “But you can hardly blame the left for the trade union bureaucracy!”

Well, apologies, comrades, but you can. As Marxists, as those who fully understand the non-reformable nature of capitalism and the central role of the working class in overcoming its increasingly poisonous ramifications, we hold a crucial *responsibility*. That is to put across, in the practical context of struggle – a point based on the important processual concept of *praxis* – the essential Marxist messages of class independence from both employer and union bureaucracy.

But that’s what we do, in our paper and everything, it may be objected. Yes, you do – but you do it in the name of an organisation which should be joined if such principles are ever to become reality. The trouble is that as you say, so say many others, and they conflict and jostle against one another. What is more, they often have a “line” which must be upheld whatever the complexities of the situation or the consciousness and attitudes of those involved. And workers may complain, as does a postal worker friend of mine, that “Even the left side of Labour gives politics a bad name – there are so many left groups and they don’t get together. When we had the strike, they all came down and I said Why don’t you just go in one big group? They said We don’t agree with this, we don’t agree with that...”

So what is the answer? The answer is contained in the “movement” part of this analysis. The revolutionary left is an indispensable component of building the explicit revolutionary consciousness which is essential in bringing at least the vanguard layer of the working class to challenge the nightmare ride of 21st century capitalism. But that is precisely the task of the revolutionary left – to build and enable the *movement* from below. Not to build the “party”. To build the movement.

[1] This article is based on an essay by Brian Pearce in the collection *Essays on the history of Communism in Britain*, ed Woodhouse and Pearce, New Park Publications 1975. It can easily be found on the Internet by searching for “Some Past Rank and File Movements.”

feminism in bolivia

by Helen Álvarez Virreira

To walk the streets of La Paz is also to walk through the story of Mujeres Creando (Women Creating) an anarchist and feminist movement which has used graffiti and creativity as its forms of struggle and has made the streets its canvas. “Women who get organised don’t have to iron shirts any more”, “I don’t want to be the woman of your dreams, I want to be the woman of my dreams” and “Because Evo Morales doesn’t know how to be a father (he tried to disown his daughter), he doesn’t know what it means to be a mother” are among its graffiti.

They do not consider themselves artists but rather “agitators in the streets”. The group is a reference point for Bolivian society, a reference point of rebellion and challenging the patriarchal system and violence in all its forms for more than 15 years.

They denounce neoliberal governments, which have kept the population in poverty and unemployment and as a consequence have caused massive emigration to Argentina and Spain, especially by women. These are “neoliberalism’s refugees”, as one of the movement’s founders, María Galindo, puts it.

They have criticised and challenged those women who call themselves feminists but who have been absorbed into the state apparatus, converting them into technocratic functionaries or “NGOistas”, enriching themselves amid poverty and co-opting certain groups of women in order to patronise them as grateful beneficiaries. “Today neoliberalism dresses itself up with women hungry for power”, they thus write on the walls of the city.

Now they are questioning the government of Evo Morales, who they say is letting hopes for real social change in Bolivia fade away. The convening of a Constituent Assembly was an achievement of the October 2003 mass revolt, but the new State Political Constitution, dictated from the presidential palace, has frustrated hopes.

Patriarchy as represented by institutions like the Church and the Armed Forces, remains intact. Women do not have sovereignty over their own bodies nor have they reclaimed the notion of motherhood, two among Mujeres Creando’s many demands on the Constituent Assembly. Thus they write “We will not make Eve from Evo’s rib”.

“Indigenous women, whores, lesbians, together in sisterhood and revolt”

The political perspective of Mujeres Creando, proclaimed on the walls of the city, has transgressed all the expectations and conventions of the system: organisation is to be based on heterogeneity; autonomy with respect to all types of expression; integration of the personal with the public; and manual, creative and intellectual labour on a par with one another. All this is affirmed in the concrete struggles which day by day emerge from its self-managed headquarters, named “La Virgen de los Deseos” (The Virgin of Desires).

The movement is characterised by the unusual degree of relations between different people and knitting together solidarity across a wide range of identities and commitments. This in itself has questioned the typical forms of organisation. Its members are lesbian and heterosexual; married, divorced and single; students and workers; indigenous and mixed-race; young and old; women working in the home and women working in prostitution. Its objective is to create a feminist subjectivity challenging all authority which exists and emerges in any sphere.

The movement began in 1992 as Comunidad Creando (Community Creating) in a district on the edge of La Paz; that same year it became Mujeres Creando, with a politics of anti-racist feminism which challenged the elite of privileged women who separate the personal from their role in public life and who divide manual from intellectual labour. They also challenged the left – in which the first three members of the group were active – for seeing women as objects, and reclaimed the kind of anarchism practiced by Bolivian men and women in the early 20th century.

From the outset the group has participated in international feminist gatherings, discussing with different feminist tendencies and thus being able to build its ideological identity with others’ contributions.



slogans demanding free choice: abortion is still illegal in bolivia

“Rebellion, it’s your fault I’ll be happy”

The social impact of Mujeres Creando can be seen in three moments in its history. In 1997, a hunger strike by the feminist movement was decisive in the freeing of the Mexican Raquel Gutiérrez, jailed without sentence for five years for armed uprising. With this legal precedent, two weeks later all prisoners accused of subversion and suffering from delayed court hearings were freed, including current vice-president Álvaro García Linera.

In 2001 it co-ordinated a more than 100-day-long mobilisation of poor debtors, bringing together more than 15,000 people victim of bank usury and NGOs granting micro-credits (at interest rates of up to 70%) from donated money. The protests highlighted the abuse of people on low incomes, especially women.

In October 2003 the movement impulsed a hunger strike by 400 people demanding the resignation of the then-current president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, which was decisive in his fall, as part of the revolt led by the poorest sections of society.

“Whether in Arabic, Aymara or Spanish, women want to say, ‘dignity’”

In 2005 Mujeres Creando opened “La Virgen de los Deseos”, a self-managed building constituted as a centre for development of feminist thought, generation of economic struggles and construction of solidaristic relations between women and men.

“La Virgen” is a place of concrete struggle, day to day, in which a group of women engage in different activities which help sustain the centre, selling books and art, serving food and maintaining lodgings for foreign people who want to see the country or know more about Mujeres Creando themselves. This space is also a meeting place for social movements, for example that of women who work in prostitution, who have their national gatherings at the centre. It also provides accommodation for women who are victims of violence.

The house also offers free medical attention, a library of school books, a bookshop, Internet access, a video hall for the display of feminist films, meeting rooms for workshops and a large dining-hall where political and cultural events are held.

But “the home of Mujeres Creando” is much more. It is home to “Mujeres en Busca de Justicia” (Women Seeking Justice), a free and unbureaucratic legal service which supports women who try to escape the vicious circle of violence. In one year of functioning it has processed more than 800 cases.

There also can be found the “Mi Mamá Trabaja” (My Mother Works), a nursery and feminist pedagogical project discussing planning ahead for life, particularly for women who work in the home or who are prostitutes. This is the only space with three shifts, at morning, afternoon and night. Here boys and girls also receive school support.

The other major project being established in “La Virgen de los Deseos” is *Radio Deseo*, the first “social means of communication”, challenging the traditional radio establishment in Bolivia. This can be heard online, www.radiodeseo.com.

‘dreamers of a new day’

★David Broder reviews Sheila Rowbotham’s new book about turn-of-the-century feminism

I first heard about this book when I saw a review of it in *The Observer*. The reviewer began her first paragraph by referring to the under-representation of women in David Cameron’s Cabinet.

Of course, establishment politics and politicians are sexist. But the ideas typical of the reviewer’s focus—not enough women ministers, not enough women in board-rooms—is greatly at odds with both the themes of the book, and the intentions of the many great working-class women whose activism Rowbotham describes. Their struggles were to liberate the whole of society, not just to pave the way for a handful of women to ‘make it big’.

This does however relate to a debate very apparent in this period: is the goal of feminism just formal equal rights, or is it to challenge more fundamentally the way in which capitalist society itself is ‘gendered’? Rowbotham’s protagonists fought to change everyday life and saw gender reflected in all fields of activity.

For instance, she quotes Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writing on 1915 on society’s ‘dress code’: “Cloth is a social tissue; a sort of social skin’... the distinct costumes of men and women were meant to ensure that ‘we should never forget sex’”.

This challenging of gender roles went hand-in-hand with challenging reactionary and stuffy attitudes towards sex. The 1880s saw a strong development in the USA of “an explicitly female counter-cultural space in which to articulate wants and desires”, challenging both the idea that sex was just part of a woman’s “marital duties” but also the patronising assumptions of ‘moral reformers’. We are told of one woman who, when she “braved a brothel in Toledo to rescue a prostitute, she found, instead of the victim she had expected, ‘a woman of mature years, handsome, dignified, entirely mistress of herself’ in a house that was ‘luxurious but vulgarly ugly’”.

Educational authoritarianism was also questioned, for example in the Finnish immigrant socialist halls in America where children called all adults ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ and “implicit... was the idea that the upbringing of children was a social responsibility”.

Rowbotham furthermore details the work of birth control advocate Stella Browne, who “saw women’s control over procreation as part of a wider process of creative, liberatory revolution”. She comments, “The slogans ‘workers’ control’ and ‘birth control’ foregrounded active individual agency in the wider struggle to transform society”.

Indeed, she counterposes ideas like those of Browne and Alexandra Kollontai to the various birth control plans advocated by eugenicists, and the ‘left-wing’ reaction to this which feared birth control would reduce the working-class population: while the socialist feminist approach stressed individual needs and desires, the latter attitude was based on grandiose and anti-democratic schemas.

The book does make some effort to look into the failings of the male-dominated left, for example the neglect of women—in particular black women—by the American trade union movement. However, Rowbotham does not really integrate this into discussion of the connection between the gendered nature of many left and workers’ movement organisations, and their bureaucratic and statist means of organising.

This is hinted at in the book, for example the objections of the likes of communist Sylvia Pankhurst and the Industrial Workers of the World to statist welfare schemes, or ‘wages for housework’, which they saw as paternalistic measures institutionalising the family unit. Rowbotham’s and Lynne Segal’s articles in *Beyond the Fragments* both discuss in more depth how we should defend state welfare provision while also demanding greater say in how public services are run.

Dreamers of a New Day is heavy reading due to the sheer volume of subjects, individuals and political struggles discussed. However it is valuable in demonstrating the interconnection of collective political action and individual behaviour, and how the society we want in the future has to be created in the here and now.

where next for the commune?

★ Leo and Mark of Bristol Commune reply to a recent debate on the way forward for our network.

In the May issue of *The Commune* it was suggested that our small network take the next step and constitute itself as a 'league' by converging with other small groups into a more unified organisation. It is unclear as to why the proposal is being made. Undoubtedly the formation of organisations can contribute significantly to the development of class struggle but they still have to be rooted within the political and economic context.

Any step up in communist organisation can only come from an increase in struggle in which the organisation is firmly embedded. Currently, The Commune is very marginal to the class struggle as a whole, so the form of our organisation needs to reflect that situation. The organic development of an organisation means that it is not only linked to the level of class struggle and political consciousness of the class but that it is also linked to our own lives as communists in struggle. While we share the vision of a pluralist, democratic communist organisation, we question the wisdom of focusing a substantial part of our energy on building such an organisation at this time.

Chris writes that “we urgently need the recomposition of communists into a more unified organisation”. We are unsure as to what underpins this urgency other than some abstract aspiration. Any communist league must be pushed into being by a heightened class struggle when communism begins to have some roots within our class. Any change in organisational form ought to reflect a change in the class context not solely the aspirations of its members. Here, we agree on the primacy of class struggle with Oisín’s contribution in the last issue of *The Commune* and, in a general sense, with Nic Beuret’s statement in his reply to the ‘recomposition’ debate, where he presents resistance and conflict as the point of departure (both articles appeared in issue 15 of *The Commune*).

While, undoubtedly there will be some intense class struggles ahead, the current situation is not comparable with that of the existence of the original communist league in 1840s, when the air was pregnant with international revolution. This may change but we are not yet in that situation. Furthermore, suitable groundwork for taking advantage of an upsurge in struggle will not be building an organisational shell ready to receive an influx of workers, no matter how attractive this is on paper.

Our platform states:

“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.”

These committees do not yet exist outside of London, yet the proposal is to establish a League! A federal structure would need strong vibrant local committees. We are no-



battle of ideas: our stall at 'marxism 2010'

where near having this as yet. The proposal would make more sense if there were dozens of Commune supporters within each of the cities, with local committees having shown in practice that it is possible to have a network of communists which is both co-operative and pluralistic. For this proposal to really make sense we would need to see a substantial increase in support amongst workers for communist ideas. We have no purchase amongst the working class; the Communist League would be a paper organisation.

We have been a network for such a short time, with very few people actively engaged with us. The tasks we face are enormous and we have yet to work out what strategies might help, let alone take the first steps along the road. We should allow the network more time to explore the limits of its potential. Instead our efforts seem to be looking for convergence with similar tiny groups which it is hoped will give The Commune more weight. It mirrors the traditional Left's obsession with organisational issues, an obsession that appears to be based on having a sense of being in control of events and a sense of achievement, while the messy business of relating to other workers is unpredictable and more often than not leads to rather meagre results.

A more 'unified' organisation which is expected to make substantial policy decisions is likely to lead to factional struggles over the political direction of The Commune. In itself this is not a bad thing as long as an organisation is of a considerable size and has some real support inside the working class. Without this, political disputes are likely to be settled through people leaving the organisation because the consequences of such splits have little political importance. Rather than a tiny 'communist league' being a model of communist pluralism, what we are likely to see is convergence of organisations enthused with the spirit of co-operation followed by frustration that a particular position is not being pursued, followed by splits.

The history of the Left is replete with mergers and separation. Why should the proposed Communist League be any different? A commitment to pluralism would be insufficient to hold such an organisation together, because political disputes will not be tempered by having to relate to the class in

any meaningful way. They will be about the direction of The Commune; they will be about fighting for a particular perspective to be adopted, not within the class where we have no influence, but within the organisation.

In the current context of political isolation, a more unified organisation is likely to become just another group hoping to sell its wares to a sceptical and often indifferent class. As Oisín points out, finding an unoccupied niche in the left spectrum, no matter how attractive, is not the way to develop communist activity but the way to an identity politics, in a competition of political brands that few want to buy.

Those of us who see ourselves as communists would be better served by a loose pluralistic network of people with whom we can work together when possible and separately when necessary. A loose network in which tendencies and political groups can work together without being concerned at the direction of The Commune as a whole is more likely to encourage the pluralism we all subscribe to because it could accommodate different strategies and policies. It would encourage dialogue between the different perspectives while enabling co-operation between tendencies on particular issues, while still allowing groups and individuals to undertake specific actions where there is no agreement within The Commune as a whole. This would allow us to co-operate with a variety of groups with different perspectives in real existing struggles and avoid becoming too focussed on our political identity in relation to other Left groups.

However, as Nic points out, first and foremost, the network should be about us and our struggle and developing our political understanding and when more people want to be part of the network it will be about their struggle and their understanding too. Our hope is that The Commune becomes a larger network of communist workers who can use its resources to build solidarity, activity in struggle and self-education. But this growth will be more dependent on an upsurge in class struggle and resistance, in which people can identify with what we are trying to do, rather than on the existence of an attractive organisational model.

The issue is much broader than the 'yes' or 'no' to the 'recomposition' project. The issue for The Commune is to open the questions of our strategy and our goals and discuss it deeply and openly between each other. So far we have not even been able to finish the election of the editorial board, secretary, treasurer, etc., motions suggested by Chris. Many of us have not yet met each other!

In this situation moving to a larger and more formal structure without first building up a solid experience of comradeship is one of the worst steps we could chose to take. In our next article, we will discuss the thesis of the political disenfranchisement of the working class with the alleged need for a new workers' representation, as these concerns seem to have been the justification for the whole 'recomposition' project. We will finish with a reflection on the possible relationship between our network and the class struggle, where the latter is genuinely in command.

reflections on 'beyond resistance' day school

*** On 19th June The Commune held the 'Beyond Resistance' summer school in London. 67 people registered. We hope to present videos of some sessions on our website. Sharon Borthwick reports on the sessions she attended.**

Very much enjoyed the summer school. I went to Sean Bonney and Danny Ryan-Smith's Alienation and Critique of Everyday Life in the morning. Interesting points were raised by speakers about the bourgeois control of every aspect of our lives and people's general acceptance of strained, alienated living.

We discussed the misery of people living without control over their lives; religion on the rise for solace instead of people attacking the real powers that be; the rise of mental illness under circumstances of such unnatural existence. And the new favoured remedy – cognitive therapy which tells you to change your own thought patterns (and is very cheap to run – rapidly trained therapists and large group sessions) over R D Laing's theory that it is rather mad not to be mad under capitalism. Many participants suggested ideas for further reading including Marx, Adorno, Lafargue, Meszaros. There was lively talk about estranged work and leisure.

After lunch I attended the Community Organising session. Talks were given by LCAP and Friends of Hackney Nurseries. This was really practically useful for ways to be activist in the local community. LCAP are concentrating on housing issues and give good advice on their website about what legally councils are required to do for you when you are homeless and listing the tricks councils engage in to not even put you down on the housing list. LCAP are fighting for decent housing for all, empty properties to be used, rents to never be more than 25% of people's income. Based in Hackney, LCAP are now concentrating on spreading their efforts throughout London and beyond.

Friends of Hackney Nurseries told us about the extent of the cuts – very few public service nursery places are left available, the private sector encroaching over all. FHN get the media involved and organise fund raising events and demonstrations. LCAP are also involved on behalf of the unemployed and are preparing for welfare reforms, e.g. those on incapacity benefits being pushed into work even though there are already not enough jobs – merely to appease the populist right wing, for show, as its hardly a practical measure. LCAP are active against private enterprises such as A4E which are running absolutely useless unemployment

schemes at huge government expense. They have occupied job centres as well as leafletting.

Speakers from all over Britain were involved in this discussion – from Dundee to Lewisham. We heard about a Lewisham school occupation which extended its original remit to link with workers from e.g. Visteon and Vestas. This is surely the way forward – for us all to get involved in each others' local struggles to whatever extent we can. Talking of which, users and staff at Goldsmith's nursery have been told without any notice that it is going to shut.

The last session I went to was on Capital and the Democratic State. Emma Gallwey held this alone and was absolutely brilliant. She talked about the state and debt. How the election served as propaganda for the cuts over any other alternative such as raising taxes; bonds selling to be bought back beyond means enabling further spending on defence; the lack of transparency on what actual state spending is; the whole debt thing as a constructed discourse (all in it together) over real things like people's needs.

Some people at this discussion seemed to see no alternative to the state and thought it would still have to be there and a part of any revolutionary action. I don't at all understand this line of thought and nor did Emma. Are most of us at least against the state? I hope so.

platform of the commune

1. Our Politics

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

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

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

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

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

ment 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.

the commune around britain

★Conference: we are planning a conference in London for the weekend of 11th-12th September. Follow our website for info.

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

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 group is holding a film night on Wednesday 21st July. We will be showing *Coconut Revolution*, which is about the successful uprising of the indigenous people of Bougainville against the Papua New Guinea armed forces. 8pm at The Factory, Cave Street off Portland Square, Saint Pauls, Bristol: tea and cake provided.

The next discussion meeting, on social democracy, is from 6pm on Sunday 25th July, also to be held at The Factory on Cave Street. See the advert on our website for suggested reading.

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

★North-West: the next Manchester Class Struggle Forum is a discussion on anarcho-syndicalism: 7pm on Monday 19th July at Friends Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS. For details contact Mark on 07976 386737.

★West Midlands: call Dave on 02476 450027

★Wrexham: for info send an email to Steve at redlantern21@yahoo.co.uk

thecommune.co.uk
uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

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