Adam Ford reports on recent upheavals in China

With the US empire in terminal decline, the Chinese economy has become essential to the globally integrated capitalist economy. China is now the world’s second largest economy, having officially overtaken its neighbour Japan, with a gross domestic product of over a trillion US dollars in the second quarter of 2010. It has long enjoyed gargantuan economic growth, and even weathered the storm of the global economic crisis up to this point. But its status as “sweatshop of the world” now seems extremely vulnerable to both internal and external shocks, and a period of huge social upheaval is on the horizon.

China is currently a few decades into its ‘industrial revolution’, which is similar to those undergone by European states a couple of centuries ago. However, there are a couple of important differences. Firstly, the nation is of course playing a central role in this historic transformation of capitalism. Secondly, the sheer scale of China as a land mass, and the size of the new Chinese proletariat – estimated to be around 400 million and steadily growing – means that it dwarfs that of any other country. International capital now relies on Chinese workers to manufacture a large percentage of its electronics, cars, and clothing at super-exploitative pay rates.

But this summer there have been encouraging signs that this enormous proletariat is starting to feel its objective strength. In June, a wave of suicides at the Foxconn plant at Shenzhen provoked riots at the call of an official “yellow unions” whose bureau-branch of its electronics workers had been repressed by authorities – Honda Lock workers faced down management threats and riot police on their way to the victory. But perhaps more interesting than this was the structure of their ad hoc organization. Feeling unrepresented by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) – which openly acts as an arm of the Communist Party dictatorship – they took collective decisions and elected recallable delegates to set out their demands. So in Western terms, this summer’s Chinese strikes have very definitely been ‘wildcats’ – taken independently of the trade union bureaucracy, which has been identified as a class enemy. The official union leaders are useless and support management, as one Foshuan striker told the Financial Times.

A China Newsweek profile of the man identified as the Foshuan strike leader paints a portrait that could easily apply to tens of millions of young Chinese workers. Aged just twenty-four, Tan Ziqing left his family’s small farm six years ago, and earns just 1,300 yuan a month (about £120). Apart from his living expenses, he sends the bulk of his wages back to his family in Hunan province.

Adam Ford reports on recent upheavals in China...
solidarity with the miners’ strike in Ukraine
by Chris Kane

A major dispute is underway between miners in Pol-
tava in central Ukraine and Ferrexpo Plc, a major player on
the global market mainly engaged in mining of iron ore. All
three shifts in the open cast in the town of Komsomol-
sk, more than 300 miners each are now involved in industrial
action. Some railway locomotive drivers and workers on the
iron ore concentrating factory have joined in solidarity.

The action started on 1st August at 10am when the workers
at the ore-dressing open cast pit started at first with a go-
slow and work-to-rule. The action began when haul trucks
drivers on their way down to the 305 meter deep quarry
reduced speed of the vehicles from normal 40-45 km/h to the
more safe 10-15 km/h. Escavator and bulldozer operators,
as well as drilling technicians then joined the action in soli-
darity. Within 24 hours of the workers’ action total rock pro-
duction had fallen by less than 60% of normal volume. This
impact of the workers resistance is continuing.

The cause of the dispute was a recent re-evaluation of
workplaces which led to the opencast mine workers being
moved from the ‘1st list’ (which implies heavy-load condi-
tions) to the ‘2nd list’. This means abolition of a number of
benefits:

• the retirement age will be lifted from 50 to 55 years;
• required working life will be increased from 20 to 25
  years;
• required length of service at heavy-load workplaces
  was from 10 to 12.6;
• 10 days will be cut from annual holiday entitlement

Evaluation is done every 5 years; after the previous one,
workers kept their ‘first list’. Since then their trucks became
older, while the mine grew even deeper. Despite the fact
that the certification of job hazard categories is in contraven-
tion of Ukrainian law all legal means to contest it led to pro-
tected and unresolved cases in the courts.

Over the last year the management has used lies and black-
mail to increase production rates; however each time rates
were raised at the end of the month the workers were left
without their deserved bonuses. To fulfill quotas, truck driv-
ers routinely have to transgress the legal speed limit. Until
recently, the highest speed has been 25-32 km/h (depend-
ing on the make of vehicle), while truck drivers have to
drive at 40-45 km/h.

The company still considered production was growing too
slowly. The company used this to deny workers their bo-
nuses. The bonus in question could reach 1000 UAH which
is a significant proportion of the average wage (4500 UAH).
Meanwhile, during last 2 years workers’ incomes have
dropped almost fourfold due to inflation and currency de-
valuation.

Working hours have also been increased from 8 to 12 per
day. Also, drivers of heavy haulers (80-136 tons Belaz, Cat-
epillar and Komatsu mining trucks) are now being officially
registered simply as ‘drivers’. In response to this intolerable situation the industrial action is con-
tinuing; judging from the results of the first week, man-
agement isn’t eager to look for constructive solutions. With
their every step, the factory management has sought to
escalate the dispute.

After workers had announced the beginning of their action
in the media, the Ferrexpo company press department has
launched a disinformation campaign trying to refute and
misrepresent the workers action. After video of interviews
with workers of the mine had been shown, the press began
to side with the workers. In response the company has
adopted a new tactic of seeking to enter into negotiations,
whilst launching a new press campaign in order to reassure
the Ukrainian and foreign media that there is no threat of a
full stoppage of production at the mine, and that the action
doesn’t affect the enterprise’s revenues.

Meanwhile, at a meeting with the region’s deputy govern-
or, workers were invited to stop the industrial action, and a new
commission for evaluation would be instituted. Workers,
fearing deception, continued their action, and the next day,
4th of August, the management issued order #1800 by
which it has unilaterally scrapped a number of safety rules
for drivers of heavy haulers. Specifically, they excluded the
rule which forbade overtaking and included the rule which
sets minimal speed limit. Overtaking and overruns are the
two most frequent reasons of wrecks in the quarry.

The independent trade union ‘People’s Solidarity’ has writ-
ten collective letters to the public prosecutor’s office and to
the Ombudsman. The management also appealed to the
local authorities, and activists received summons to the
local public prosecutor’s office. It seems like the authorities
act as the employer’s agents to intimidate workers. One of
the workers’ leaders was fired. Some workers were sus-
pended from work. Repression against workers is growing.

Now the employer has hired 70 scab drivers from another
city and put them up in a hotel in Komsomolsk under
the guise of private detectives. Every day, armed with Kalash-
nikov machine-guns, private guards/convoy scabs to the
quarry and back to the hotel giving no possibility even to
speak to them. (It should be noted that machine-gun fire-
arms are officially prohibited for private guards in Ukraine.)

At the moment strikebreakers have not succeeded in in-
creasing production because they do not find it so easy to
drive the heavy mining trucks. It’s clear that it would be im-
possible to increase output without grave danger for the life
of workers. But it looks like the employer does not care
about possible fatalities.

In spite of this the strikers are resolute; they are doing their
utmost to maintain their action in the face of the intimidation
and strike breaking by Ferrexpo Plc. The management, hav-
ing no desire to agree to the workers demands, pays for
publications in the international media on a daily basis, as-
suring readers of colossal revenue growth. Such boasting
is particularly cynical, since everyone knows that this revenue
is obtained by the super-exploiting of the workers at the
enterprise.

The industrial action will last until full satisfaction of the
workers’ demands, which are as follows:

• an increase of wages by at least 50%;
• lowering daily and monthly output quotas to fit the safety
  requirements and actual human abilities;
• resolution of the ‘1st hazard list’ and relevant social
  and pension benefits to all workers of the mine.

This action is clearly provoked by the employer’s impudent
unwillingness to meaningfully negotiate with the workers.
Ferrexo Poltava Mining C.E.O. Viktor Lotous said to work-
ers that they are “clown and anachronistic driver to ‘change
his wife’ if he can’t provide for the family.

Nearly one thousand of workers are involved in the action
and are losing now approximately 40% of salary due to the
underfulfillment of output norms.

The Poltava miners need international solidarity to force
Ferrexo to stop repression, negotiate seriously and secure
the workers’ just demands.

Demonstrate outside Ferrexpo’s office in London on Friday 3rd September from 4:30pm at 2-4 King Street, SW1.

Sponsors of the demonstration include: The Commune; Joe Marino, General Secretary of Bakers, Food and
Allied Workers Union; Indian Workers Association (GB); Indian Welfare Network; Maltby House, Organiser and
Thomas, President, London Region RMT; Glenroy Watson,
RMT Finsbury Park branch chairperson; Permanent Revo-
lation, Republican Communist Network; Indian Welfare
Association (GB); Latin American Workers Association.
A UNISON branch official looks at the attacks on the left within the union at a time when public sector workers face major cuts

This summer Dave Prentis won his bid to become General Secretary of UNISON for the third time with 67.2% of the vote (based on a very poor 14% turn out). As a speaker at conference Dave Prentis often talks left.

However, despite his fine words, he has been at the helm during a period when the left have suffered serious attacks from the leadership. Several very well known and respected left wingers in UNISON have faced harassment and even expulsion on trumped up and unfounded charges. Some of these experiences are well known amongst the wider labour movement.

One of the most infamous of these attacks was the disciplining of four branch officers and Socialist Party members over a leaflet featuring the three wise monkeys ‘hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil’. This was intended as a criticism of the Conference’s standing orders committee who had ruled a large proportion of contentious motions out of order. The leadership’s response was that the standing orders committee was black. This dreadful decision was made despite the knowledge that the individuals were active Socialists and hardly likely to be racist. Even amongst many union moderates this was regarded as a politically motivated attack.

This year, a delegate was ordered to leave the conference floor for wearing a T-shirt saying “Yunus Baksh, working class hero” on it. Yunus has been one of the most well known figures to be subject to this witch hunt. The UNISON leadership had sided with his employer when he was sacked for alleged misconduct and dealt him a double blow by expelling him from the union. An employment tribunal has since declared Yunus’ dismissal from employment as unfair and due to his activities as a trade unionist. It is a pretty sorry state of affairs when an employment tribunal supports a victimised trade unionist whilst his union will not.

What is most sad is the devastating effect this has had on those activists that have been subject to the witch hunt. Without exception they are people who have devoted their lives to UNISON and the unions that came together to form UNISON in the early 90’s. They have been leading figures in some of the most energetic and inspirational branches. What the leadership fail to understand (or maybe understand horribly too well) is that by removing these individuals they are removing a good deal of the heart of our union and weakening us in our fight against the bosses attacks.

The attacks began it appears with the raiding of the Plymouth city branch in 2008. This raid led to the suspension and eventual expulsion of Tony Staunton, a respected trade unionist and leading figure of the United Left in the South West. He was basically accused of downloading leafletting materials on to a computer he used for union work but this very neatly coincided with his bid to run against a right winger in a branch election. The witch hunt has since engulfed some of the best known figures on the UNISON left.

The reason for these attacks can be discovered in the leadership’s relationship with New Labour. In their latter term in office, opposition to privatisation and cuts from public sector workers increased. Attacks were occurring on Local Government pensions, outsourcing and PFI builds were happening across the whole public sector and the marketisation of the NHS had led to a crisis and major cuts in many NHS trusts.

Some branches of UNISON began to fight back. It was very obvious that the leadership of UNISON didn’t want to rock the boat for the Labour Government and actively tried to keep their membership quiet.

A national demonstration over the NHS cuts was only called after massive pressure from lay activists and then held once the initial anger had turned to demoralisation. Branches were left to fight alone as no nationally co-ordinated action was organised. Members were encouraged to accept below inflation pay rises.

However certain figures on the left were winning over the membership to a position of fighting back. At the 2006 Health sector conference Yunus Baksh had received a standing ovation from the floor after encouraging conference to resist New Labour’s cuts and the privatisation agenda in the NHS. The witch hunt has attempted to silence these individuals and has left others worried about standing up against the leadership’s approach for fear of a similar fate.

Things don’t appear to have changed since the election of the ConDems Government either. The ConDems are imposing a pay freeze on all grades in the NHS at staff nurse level and above and a below inflation offer for those below a staff nurses grade. UNISON have already produced a circular pouring cold water upon any prospect of an Industrial Action ballot despite conference agreeing on this in the event of a pay freeze. I can only imagine that they believe large scale industrial action would be damaging to New Labour’s chances of getting back in to power. Maybe they think it could lose public sector workers sympathy from the general public: as if we aren’t part of the general public!

The only way to change this abysmal situation is for UNISON members and public sector workers in general to begin to fight back against the ConDems plan to devastate public services and our pay and conditions. This fight back will need to be organised by the public sector workers themselves regardless of what their union leadership thinks. It is only in doing this that they will grow in confidence and class consciousness and begin to challenge the politics of the leadership.

Whilst I think it remains important for socialists to stand for elections in the union it has to be remembered that real change comes from below and election results are just a reflection of the level of class consciousness amongst the rank and file.
Jack Staunton writes on his work in a call centre compiling government market research surveys

When drunk we feel a strange kind of tiredness. Not the exhaustion of physical exertion nor the sleepiness which diskus in the late evening, but rather a slaying, dulling hibernation of the mind. This same sensation is brought about by endless hours of repetitive workplace routine. I have worked well over a thousand days at the call centre. I have read through still more thousands of surveys. The call centre does not test us physically or mentally yet it is a massive drain of human energy and vitality.

The idea is to collate telephone surveys for various government departments. We ask businesses how many training they do, if they need more government support, what they think the answer to the recession is. Every survey is unique yet they are all the same: half-arsed and self-contradictory fragments of ideas, answering what they think they are meant to say to a bunch of questions which tell them what they are meant to say.

No-one employed here is interested in the work: our skills are not utilised, we have no initiative and we have no sense of power.

Wasting time with people who waste time doing surveys

The important thing is to get the person to do the survey. If they know nothing about the subject, that's fine, as long as they don't speak as if they were experts. We are called "Human Resources" managers, they have all the time in the world for surveys since their only other responsibility is hiring and firing.

Mostly the intention of the surveys is to big up various quangos or new legislation, so that people we speak to are told that their company's new byword and a man donning a cat costume be like a salesperson. After one dry spell, we'd been away for six weeks for the election. The telephone morning when we got back Leroy (E7/hour, 2 years' service) said "Good, look at all the losers crawling back here!". Hypocritical but accurate. We really need it. At night the wages have been the same for years, but people are queueing up to work here.

No-one identifies as a call centre worker: it's an (endless) stop-gap for them, or else they'll tell you everyone else who works here is in a dead end but I'm going to make something of myself. You bump into some of them at demos for Gaza. They think capitalism's shit. They wouldn't dream of joining the union. We are atomised, powerless, unconfident and desperate for work we know to be beneath us.

Did you ever read the story about the guy who won the lottery and beat cancer, at any other job there is some notion of compensation. Many driven insane by this bare existence. One of his colleagues befriends a mouse, building a little cardboard house for it. The mouse has no end of problems: it eats the people's crisps, gets into the kitchen, most of the time it just sits there for days. And then it dies of a blow torch. An anonymous suicide, though in the notes he wrote: "I've been beaten by reality...". He has not once heard of the genre, 'The blue-collar writer'.

On the strength of this I may try out some more. Rivethead put me in mind of Herman Melville's Bartleby, The scrivener (1853). The narrator of this story is Bartleby's em-ployer. Other copyists in his employ cannot endure the whiteness of a office day without a chance to vent their spleen. One has morning bouts of ill humour, shifting his desk here and there, sighing as he tries this and that position over his papers while his colleague scriver works efficiently but just looks out like this the whole day and makes blotchy copies by afternoon. Bartleby is employed on sight for his quite demeanour, "palidly neat, pitilessly respectable, incurably fortitudinous". He is set in his master's office by a window with "no view at all" behind a high screen so to completely isolate him from sight. Here he writes on, "silently, palely, mechanically" but when asked to do anything at all on top like proof the copies with his workmates, calmly replies, "I would prefer not to". He prefers this passive resistance unto death ultimately preferring not to sustain life further by food.

Like Ben Hamper and his colleagues he has lost his own mind by the repetitive actions demanded of him by his wage slavery.

The wire faces inwards: the security is to keep us in!

Sharon Borthwick reviews Rivethead, a 'book of tales from the assembly line'

Revealing a talent for writing poetry at school does not reveal Ben Hamper of his birthright. Duplicating his father and revealing a talent for writing poetry at school does not reveal Ben Hamper of his birthright. Duplicating his father and duplicating his father's crappy lot at the General Motors plant in his hometown of Flint, Michigan. But failed stints at other ventures led him through GM's grounds, past the barber wire. Later a fellow "prisoner" becomes absorbed by the fact that the wire faces inwards, 'the security is to keep us in'

Other means to incarceration are the good wages, 'that pay rivets is fun' one of the more notably contemptible and no prizes to do it. Do anything that may beat the everwatched, tyrant clock. So how do they survive, 'the repetition as strangulation' load after load after load? For thousands of hours.

That's part of the problem though. Management don't need to pretend it's interesting. At Somersetfeld they tell you you're part of a team working to improve customer service, at the charity call centre they tell you you're helping raise money to beat cancer, at any other job there is some notion of collective effort or customer service. In the briefling here they tell you to straight: this is dull, you don't need to understand it because that's not your problem, but work hard and it will be over sooner.

Who are we, how are we run?

Thursday afternoon and time to book your shifts for next week. There is no guarantee of work, you could get told your shift for tomorrow has been cancelled. 'Sorry, we had enough work for two hundred people today but there's no shifts available on Monday'.

Fred the anarchist manager will tell you the call centre is not a full time job. You might have been here four years, yes, and Johnny's forty-six and has been here since 1995, but you shouldn't expect us to give you any shifts next week. Why don't you look for work over Monday? 'There's ten call centres within a mile of here.

Often there are less than ten desks occupied by workers, the buzz dies down for a few weeks. The recession hasn't meant less people are fired, government research in a month and a half before the election. Lucky our Coalition rulers didn't need another poll this autumn.

Most of the colleagues are stois. For they are not call centre workers, but aspiring actors, artists, law students. Part-time for years, but one day they'll return to their true calling. Their actions are like Ben Hamper and Snowdon, working, worked, working, worked, worked, worked, worked, worked, worked, worked, worked, worked, worked... for thousands of hours.

Hampers' interest in writing eventually resurfaces. Whilst he was starts to work as a technical writer at the now then Editor of The Michigan Voice. He introduced himself by writing about music until Moore persuades him to expound about life on the assembly line. For his column he goes by times more_petulently,然著_ned to be more clever and he is courted by the big American talk shows. The book leaves open what happened next as we leave him still recovering from mental illness. Hamper and other victims of drudgery have given rise to the genre, 'The blue-collar writer'.

On the strength of this I may try out some more. Rivethead put me in mind of Herman Melville's Bartleby, The scrivener (1853). The narrator of this story is Bartleby's em-ployer. Other copyists in his employ cannot endure the whiteness of a office day without a chance to vent their spleen. One has morning bouts of ill humour, shifting his desk here and there, sighing as he tries this and that position over his papers while his colleague scriver works efficiently but just looks out like this the whole day and makes blotchy copies by afternoon. Bartleby is employed on sight for his quite demeanour, "palidly neat, pitilessly respectable, incurably fortitudinous". He is set in his master's office by a window with "no view at all" behind a high screen so to completely isolate him from sight. Here he writes on, "silently, palely, mechanically" but when asked to do anything at all on top like proof the copies with his workmates, calmly replies, "I would prefer not to". He prefers this passive resistance unto death ultimately preferring not to sustain life further by food.

Like Ben Hamper and his colleagues he has lost his own mind by the repetitive actions demanded of him by his wage slavery.
the strategies we need, the strategies we don’t

Tom Denning writes on the organisational objectives and methods needed to fight the new government’s cuts

Around the country, anti-cuts committees have been set up, on the auspices of the local trades Council or a Union branch. These committees are just beginning to find their feet, to produce bulletins, to plan demos, street stalls and public formations. At their best, they will be alliances of local workers and community activists, determined to work together to take effective action to force back cuts.

As is so often the case, the activity of the real movement has run ahead of its theorists. But what does that movement consist of so far? In what ways does the changing structure of the public-sector workforce determine the needs of that movement? What does it need to grow, and win?

The reorganisation of the class

In the last three decades, just as capital sought new avenues for profit through financialisation, and increasingly came to rely on mass debt—private, corporate, state—and inflating asset prices, it also sought, urgently, to extract more labour from the working class, for less. The changes that Thatcher—and her successors—wrought in the pursuit of this agenda “fundamentally changed the character of British society.” If we examine just four areas in which such changes have taken place, it is possible to see how the tax on the working class of the past three decades defines the present needs of our movement.

Public sector work overwhelmingly and increasingly performed by women. The declining viability of the single pay-cheque family is a significant factor in pulling increasing numbers of women into work. 65.2% of public-sector women workers (compared to 41.2% of private-sector workers). This probably underestimates the real picture, since higher grades and management are still overwhelmingly male. Women typically perform low grade, part-time jobs, and for these reasons, will be hit especially hard by the proposed cuts. Meanwhile, the left and the official leadership in unions are overwhelmingly male. Why does this matter? Because union activity, and movement must be organised by those whose interests it seeks to defend, and in a way that empowers that constituency. The socialist wing of the women’s liberation movement produced a wealth of ideas on how activists should organise differently, relying less on “heroic” leaders and more on cooperative organisations—women composed of working women—because women still bear the greater burden of childcare, anti-cuts meetings often to provide creches.

Outsourcing, casualisation, agency work, and ‘ạcausal’ workers. In order to keep the costs of labour low and shunt up production capital, if necessary, workers are deployed as assets to divide workers, making them more vulnerable, dispensable, low skilled, and less likely to share common connections. In many respects, this is an extension of the store, 19th century corporation, performed by agencies. In many areas of work, recent years have seen the accelerated introduction of low paid auxiliary staff, as an alternative to increasing the number of those on existing grades: think of teaching assistants, or community support officers. These low paid agency workers often do the same job as those who are directly employed. There is a rapid replacement in the number of part-time workers, as well as “zero hours” contracts and “sessional” work.

Many of the current government’s plans for public sector, as well as those implemented by New Labour since 1997, have been about undermining national bargaining, whilst intensifying outsourcing and casualisation. Academy schools and recent proposals to turn the NHS into a network of private contractors are two examples. Why is all this important? Because we need to ensure that mass unemployment is as expensive and hence is as undesirable for the state as possible.

The bureaucratisation and disorganisation of key unions. Trade unions are contradictory phenomena: on the one hand, expressions of workers’ self-organisation and activity; on the other, institutions which also tend to restrict that same activity. With the quiescence of the workers’ movement in recent years, the latter tendency has become particularly strong. Let’s look at some of the problems. Teachers are divided into three unions, with little culture of supporting each other’s industrial action, and support staff are in two more. PCS, the civil servants’ union, has a relatively left-wing leadership, willing to take industrial action, but in recent years it seems as though either the organisation or will have been lacking for serious fights.

UNISON, the most important public sector union by some way, is in a deep state. Outside local government, many branches are effectively organised through patronage from the centre, whilst density and organisation are very low. The union has a record of colluding with employers to victimise key militants and to suppress left branches. The relationship between the union and the state, through the Labour Party, is incestuous. For example, the Newham local government branch is run by an appointee, one Steve Terly, a Labour councilor in neighbouring Waltham Forest. Manifestly it is directly against his interests to permit militancy amongst local government workers. There are a plethora of less obvious reasons for this, and a culture of independent rank and file organisation, willing to defy union leaders and the law, and breaking the boundaries between unions, when necessary—which will be often. (This isn’t an abstract fantasy: in the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps 95% of strikes were unofficial; as late as 2003 26% of strike days were lost to unofficial action.) It is the paradox of the unions that, nonetheless, they still exist, and we still need them, in many areas, to build and strengthen Unison. Ritual denunciations of union leaders are indeed useless, but rank-and-file organisers need to have a keen awareness of their position.

All these things considered, there’s a frightening distance between the movement we have and the movement we need; between our conventional tactical and organisational repertoire, and the demands of the coming years.

The movement we have, the movement we need

The standard repertoire of the left is more or less as follows. There will be demonstration after demonstration, speech after speech, leaflet after leaflet. There will be numerous “broad” campaigns, which will hold conference after conference. The left will organise within official union structures for official strikes and for somewhat more leftward leaders to replace them.

But to think that any number of marches, no matter how many millions strong, any way of framing or presenting the issue, no matter how clever, any number of one or two or three day strikes, no matter how many people visit the picket lines, is a recipe for rolling back the cuts is deluded. If we look to our history for the last time that an assault on serious unemployment was challenged effectively, we must look to the movement against the poll tax: mass organisation, town by town, borough by borough, ward by ward, street by street. Mass direct action: refusal to pay, refusal to allow bailiffs to raid the homes of non-payers. Of course, the poll tax move- ment benefited from the relative simplicity of non-payment; each local area has its own unique connections and other direct, action we need. But it illustrates the scale of the challenge, and reminds us of our own potential: like the anti poll tax movement, we must build from below, and make our agenda disruption, not just demands.

Alliances we need, alliances we don’t

The Socialist Workers’ Party’s Richard Seymour argues for “a multi-party, multi-organisation, trade union-based united front, the sole criterion for unity within it being agreement on the objective of preventing the cuts and advancing alternative.” In particular, he emphasises the importance of the Labour Party, which “remains rooted in the organised work class.”

Richard doesn’t say what sort of alliance with what sort of Labour Party figures he’s thinking of, or what such an alliance would look like. To get vague talks of how we invite Labour councilours or MPs to speak at anti-cuts meet- ings? In general, with very few honourable exceptions, I would argue against this. Why? Firstly, these figures are not necessarily wilful, but, more importantly, they are in the sort of action that we need. Think about the Labour MP near you. Is it conceivable that they would back a call for unofficial strike action, and more importantly, even if they did, would anyone you know listen to them? The Labour Party has changed a lot—though even 20 years ago, it opposed the non-payment campaign which beat the poll tax, and were not necessary to its success.

We do not need to work with those grassroots Labour Party members who are serious about resisting cuts. But rather than providing credibility to Labour MPs who want to pos- ture against the cuts, we ought to relentlessly focus on building our own, organic leadership from below. In the time it takes any Labour MP to speckify, five public sector work- ers could have stood up and shared their experiences of work, and their hopes and fears of the future. And it is this direct contact between workers and community members that a movement can be built upon. This said, if any Labour MP is willing and able to start seriously building for industrial action, we should work with them to do that; but what we shouldn’t do is give them a platform which they can use for their own ends, while ignoring ours.

It makes no sense to decide the boundaries of your alli- ance, without first defining its aims. For this, we Form ought to follow function. In order to organise action, it is most important to agree upon methods: and the more specific, particular and definite those methods better. The movement will need to develop forms of collective and governance which constantly expose the real meaning of “cuts” (the latest form of assault on the employ- ment relations and necessarily replicable by the now post-war boom), and argue that we must not, do not to, accept others.

If your town or area doesn’t already have an anti-cuts com- mittee, consider setting one up, perhaps through a local trades council; if there is one, join, and try to make it open, democratic, practical, and militant. Whether you choose to organise di- rectly through the union, or with the assistance of a Labour Party figure he’s thinking of, or what such an alli- ence consists of so far? In what ways does the changing structure of the public-sector workforce determine the needs of that movement? What does it need to grow, and win?

The left will organise within official union structures for official strikes and for somewhat more leftward leaders to replace them.

But to think that any number of marches, no matter how many millions strong, any way of framing or presenting the issue, no matter how clever, any number of one or two or
Camille Barbagallo and Nic Beuret look at the role of public services and how the cuts axe is falling

Childcare services in the UK are under attack. Childcare services across the country are being defunded, abolished and downgraded. In this article we start with the specific cuts in Hackney to nursery places and analyse these cuts in the context of the gendered nature of the ConDems austerity budget. We explore both what enables these cuts to happen now and what their effects will be and conclude with some reflections on possible paths of resistance within the current crisis of care.

Let’s be honest - the public services that are being cut include things that we need, but we hate how they are given to us: like unemployment benefits. They also involve jobs that we rely on but resent having to do. But what is also true is that they are part of a ‘social wage’ fought for and won by previous generations. By ‘social wage’ we mean the services and direct payments provided by the state that enable our subsistence. The health services, childcare, unemployment benefits, social housing – they are our social wage. The social wage has a dual effect. It operates as a method of discipline and control and also as a means of reducing the direct cost (to us) of our own material reproduction. Instead of paying the ‘full’ cost for childcare out of our wages, we get subsidised or ‘free’ childcare. Instead of paying directly for health services, such services are funded by taxation and provided by the NHS. Instead of having to put aside money in case we are sacked, we get the dole.

The social wage is also a way of ‘paying the unpaid’. The primary focus of the social wage in social reproduction and involves labour that would otherwise be unwaged. This has historically been known as ‘women’s work’ such as caring for children, the elderly, the sick and disabled, the health of the family, and emotional and psychological services such as counselling, etc. The social wage is a way of redistributing income so as to benefit those people whose (unwaged) labour is fundamental and vital for the reproduction of workers and capitalism in general.

None of this is to say that the social wage is unproblematic. Obviously it is – under capitalism wage relations are based on exploitation and alienation, and the various elements of the social wage are no exception. We need the services because we have no other choice. This relates to the double freedom that Marx talks about as the precondition of wage labour. ‘Labour power struggles, the ultimate aim must be to go beyond the immediate relation and create a new social relationship. But we can’t do this by opting out. Not only because dropping out and making our own little utopias does not get us any closer to the necessary transformation of the world in which we live, but because the social wage represents real struggles and gains. We need to be in against and beyond the social wage.

The Hackney situation

Hackney’s nurseries are under attack ironically not because of the ConDems’ budget, but because the Learning Trust, a private company that controls the funding for children’s services in Hackney, arbitrarily cut nursery funding in April 2010. Friends of Hackney Nurseries (FHN), a coalition of nursery workers, parents and community activists, that we are members of, has been fighting to stop these cuts with some success.

The Hackney Learning Trust - the UK’s first private not-for-profit company to take over the responsibility of running all education provision - imposed cuts of up to £50,000 to nursery receiving commissioning grants. Commissioning grants subsidise childcare places for parents on low incomes. Commissioning grants have, until recently, only been paid to the 13 remaining community nurseries in Hackney, out of 68 childcare ‘settings’ in Hackney. These 68 include Council-run children’s centres, community nursery groups (managed by and staff managed nurseries) and private nurseries (private nurseries make up half of the total childcare places). As a result of the massive cuts to commissioning grant funding and cuts to other funding streams, many community nurseries are reducing both staff numbers and childcare places. Some are even facing closure because of it.

Both the Council and the Learning Trust have, after much public pressure, claimed that the overall pot of money for low-income families in Hackney has not been cut – it has just been redistributed. They have resisted providing evidence of this, and the timeline of action then reaction tells another story – one of incompetence and a slow but steady strategy of privatisation.

When nurseries were first told of the cuts (one month before they were to be implemented), FHN quickly reformed after 10 years of inactivity and immediately set about working with parents and nurseries to put pressure on the Council and Learning Trust to reverse the cuts. This all happened just prior to the general elections this year, making public shaming particularly effective as a tactic. In short order the Mayor of Hackney, Jules Pipe, condemned the Learning Trust’s behaviour and the Learning Trust started to work with the handful of nurseries that had started to publicly voice their opposition.

Despite saying publicly that the money had not been cut but redistributed, in the end the Learning Trust reversed half of the cuts largely through something they called a ‘cushioning fund’ – a one-off grant to help the affected nurseries through the hardship of the cuts. They didn’t say where this extra money had been found.

After this shambles, things got even more interesting. Meetings between nurseries and the Learning Trust were set up then cancelled without explanation. Different letters were sent, seemingly at random, to different nurseries all saying slightly different things. The Learning Trust started contacting community nurseries to offer them help in winding down their operations. During the weeks of confusion and misinformation the Learning Trust announced that commissioning grants would now be available to all nurseries in Hackney, further reducing the amount available to community nurseries (due to increased competition with the private nurseries).

What does all this mean? It would seem that the redistribution of funding from community nurseries to private nurseries is part of the last stages of the privatisation of childcare services.

Over the last 20 years the total amount of money given to community nurseries has steadily reduced. At the same time there has been an explosion of private nurseries in Hackney. Ten years ago there were no private nursery spaces in Hackney. Now, around half of all childcare places are privately provided.

Why does privatisation of childcare matter?

It could be argued, as it has been by many Hackney Councillors, that it doesn’t matter if childcare is provided by the Council, by community-run centres, or by private businesses. So as long as the total number of childcare places in Hackney hasn’t been reduced, does it really matter on what basis they are provided?

The short answer is yes. The case against privatisation can be summed up as follows. A service run according to the logic of the market tends to drive down costs (and therefore quality), reduce staff and employment conditions to the absolute minimum (reducing wages and reducing the quality of the childcare again), increase the costs to the service user (through fee increases) and reduce provision to those areas where it’s profitable (creating a system where having a service and the quality of that service directly relate to how much you earn). There is also the issue of directing public funds (via grants) to private-for-profit businesses. Any one of these outcomes is reason enough to reject the privatisation of community or public services.

But the flip side is that state-run services are also deeply problematic. They provide us with services we need but in relationships of subservience or dependence. It is no wonder that state-run services are so unpopular, with most of the population of the UK preferring service cuts to tax increases. While the services we have are a direct result of the pressure we have been able exert as antagonistic social movements, this pressure has been channelled into the creation of services that follow the logic of the state and serve the needs of capitalism. Our confrontation with capital is over the imposition of waged labour and the form this labour takes. But our struggle with the state is over the overall management of our lives; in particular, the management of our own material reproduction.

Cuts to services are not a removal of the state’s management of our lives, just a reconfiguration. With the move from community-run childcare to either Council or private childcare we lose something essential – control. The only childcare services parents have any control over in a meaningful way are community services. Committees of parents and staff manage them, and parents are encouraged to be involved at a decision-making and organisation level. In contrast Council appointed staff manage Council nurseries and private nurseries may ‘involve’ parents but they usually do so in order to reduce their costs. Privatisation undermines one of our most important gains from the struggles of the 60s and 70s – community services that we manage for our own material reproduction but that have financial resources provided by the state. This is why the slow decline of funding and the latest attack on community nurseries is so important. They are the last of the childcare services we have any control over in Hackney.
Hackney has always been something of a laboratory for New Labour, and the Learning Trust is a perfect case in point. However, it is not just in Hackney these cuts are taking place. Across the UK, at a borough level and at a University level, childcare services are facing declining funding and further cuts. At least 20 universities are cutting childcare services, many other Councils are cutting provision, rents are being increased and central Government is looking to cut funding streams.

As other observers have pointed out, the difference between New Labour and the ConDems is a difference of degree. It is clear that had New Labour won the election they too would be embarking on a social wage. In fact, Hackney were announced prior to any central Government cuts, and are taking place as part of a broader historical tendency – neo-liberalism. Clearly these cuts need to be stopped, and sufficient funding restored in the short term. In the longer term there needs to be a conversation at both a community level and a national level about how we want our children to be cared for, outside of the logic of the market and beyond just making it possible for women to re-enter the workforce in greater numbers. Before we can begin this conversation, we need to understand why these cuts are happening now, and what they mean.

Cuts to public services are not just about reducing state expenditure; they are also about revaluing the labour market and producing a specific kind of subjectivity. The current economic crisis is being used to continue the social project of neo-liberalism, even as the engine of capitalism, the financial sector falters. The neo-liberal project has developed along two axes – winding back the social wage and reintroducing the market as the basis for all social relations. However the difference between the current cuts in the UK and the earlier phases of neo-liberalism both here and elsewhere around the globe is twofold. Firstly, capitalism has no need to increase the labour force in the UK – if anything, the total numbers available for paid work needs to be reduced to make sure that the numbers of unemployed do not grow excessively and that an entire generation of workers are not lost. Secondly, there is a need to ensure that there is not a reproductive crisis in the working class (this is expressed by Cameron as the desire to ‘fix Broken Britain’). The government needs to find a way to reduce state expenditure on the social wage without significantly undermining the continuity of care, and continue the working class wage thrust.

The post-feminist discourse of ‘free-market’ feminists, ‘liberal’ feminists and the all of the major political parties enter into this crisis as an organising ideological force. It is through the discourse of ‘choice’ that women are being encouraged to either move away from waged labour and back to the home or to reside the ‘gendered’ second shift of unpaid work in the home as well as working outside the home for wages. The return to the home is not only being proposed to women – men too, but only as long as their partners earn more than they do. The idea that life decisions are rational choices made on a cost-benefit analysis pervades current responses to both the paucity of care, the disparity between men and women’s wages and an ever-present desire to escape waged labour.

It’s through the discourse of choice that the state can withdraw funding from services without endangering social reproduction or provoking confrontation. The choice of love, family and community over money and careers is at the heart of post-feminist discourse. It is also at the heart of Cameron’s Big Society. This ‘choice’ takes place within the context of a massive economic and political assault on women.

The commune around britain

Our conference is on 12th September, to be held in central London. Email us at uncaptiveminds@gmail.com to request an invite.

From Meltdown to Upheaval: an assembly on the crisis. 11th September, details page 10.

London: The Commune are at most regular demonstrations in the capital and also host our own meetings and public forums.

The next such forum is on the 1970s group Big Flame, from 7pm on Monday 30th August at the Artillery Arms, 102 Bunhill Row, near Old Street.

Join our email announcements list at https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommune-london, or phone David on 07959 245494 for more info.

Bristol: we are running a reading group series on “Alternatives to capitalism”. See website for details of September meeting.

Sheffield: come to the monthly communi-
discussion forums, resuming in Sep-
tember. See website or call Barry on 07543 652629.

North-West: we participate in the Man-
chester Class Struggle Forum. For details on its meetings, visit its website www.manchesterforum.org.uk

West Midlands: call Dave on 02476 459027

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

Uncaptive Minds

Saturday 30 October 11am – 5pm
Regent St Cinema, University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London W1B 2UW

Open to people of all genders
Free creche available: please send an email to feminist.fightback@gmail.com to confirm a place
On 20 October the ConDem government’s “Spending Review” will detail enormous cuts in public services. We are already feeling the impact of earlier cuts, many effected by Labour: nurseries and libraries are closing, jobs are being lost. As the government “austerity drive” steps up, the reality is that cuts will hit the lives of all but the wealthiest. In many cases women will be hit the hardest with recent reports estimating that women will suffer 72% of the tax and benefit cuts. Whether you’re a feminist, a trade unionist, someone affected by the cuts, or involved in fighting the cuts in your college, community or workplace, or just interested in how the landscape of the welfare state is changing, Feminist Fightback invites you to join us for a day of discussions and networking.

We want to put these cuts in a political context, link up, and share ideas and skills as we plan to fight them together.

Participatory workshops on:

What’s going on? Mapping cuts and campaigns;
Who do the cuts affect? Why are cuts a feminist issue?;
What does it mean? Demystifying the “economics of the crisis”;
What do we want? Fighting within and against the state.

For more information please see www.feministfightback.org.uk, send an email to feminist.fightback@gmail.com, or call Laura on 07971 840227

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For more info on the Hackney nurseries campaign, visit www.friendsofhackneynurseries.wordpress.com
Oleg Resin draws comparisons between growing anti-cuts campaigns and the movements of the 1970s, with reference to debates over the character of the 'public sector' and whether we can harness the state.

To think that now, with cuts falling everywhere, there is no time for general discussions or to develop theory, is to artificially separate theory from action.

This is an illusionary idea, for each action involves theory. To rush to the streets with STOP THE CUTS banners is hardly avoiding having a theory. It is just avoiding awareness of the theoretical assumptions that underlie this.

'Save Our Public Services'

The relations between the modern welfare state and the working classes are complicated and changing. The same people who are 'bashing' the welfare state as an instrument of social control and labeled social workers as the 'soft cops', turned with the fiscal crisis in the 1970s into fierce defenders of welfare services.

This situation repeats itself today: those who dare to criticize, for example, the NHS for the way it controls patient queues to judge for ourselves and organise, are quickly disciplined from our own ranks for breaking the fresh united fronts against the cuts.

So what are the characteristics of the unconscious theory behind the 'anti-theoretical' activism against the cuts? It is obviously based on the positions of defense of the welfare state.

The labour movement in general, now as in the 1970s, sees the welfare state in its ideal form as a kind of political repre- sentation of the working class, as an achievement which the class has always had and should defend against the crude laws of the economy. It claims that the 'real' state has been hijacked by the 'anti-class' and exercises certain functions in favour of capital, e.g. subsidizing private enterprises, bailing out banks, feeding the army and police or intervening in the disputes between labour and capital.

This concentration on the obvious links between capitalists and the government leads us to believe that there are still some good aspects of the state, beneficial for the working class, such as free healthcare or education.

So the labour movement, according to this theory prevalent in the campaigns against cuts, has to fight to maintain this good face of the state and eventually expand it, the ex- pense of the other, 'ugly', face of the state.

But are public services 'our services' because they are free and satisfy some of our needs? A functionalist version of Marxism seeks these answers. It tries to show that every action of the state serves the interests of capital. From this point of view, welfare can be seen as a contribution to the productivity of a company or a national economy in a competitive environment. Employers are motivated to support a healthy, efficient and educated working class from which they can in return get more value. Whereas the state welfare proportion of British national income in 1860 was 1-1.5%, its share grew to 24% in 1970. Half of state expenditure in the UK went to social services in 1975. That is why political economists James O'Connor and Ian Gough spoke in 1970s about the diversification of state services in three areas. The first, social investment, covers services increasing labour productivity. The second, social consumption, represents services that subsidize the reproduction costs of labour power. And finally social expenses, which they saw as aimed at maintaining the discipline of the non-working population (e.g. social work).

The State Debate: an instrument or a form of social relations?

Let us summarize. The first account (social democratic, Labourite) sees the state as ambivalent, with the potential to be transformed into proper socialism. The second approach (revolutionary, Leninist) understands the state as determined to perform certain functions for the capitalist class and the only possible transformation is the revolutionary 'smashing of the state'. What they both have in common is that they see the state as an instrument of class rule and relatively autonomous from the economy. In the 1970s these were no abstract theories. Both theoretical approaches informed daily actions and arguments among participants in struggles of that period (e.g. the polemics around workers' control and workers' plans, the 'community politics or class struggle' debate, 'municipal socialism', the feminist 'prefigurative' politics, etc.).

Out of these struggles but still in dialogue with the 'hard left', a new younger position was born, which might be called 'the state form' tendency. The most influential statement of this approach was probably the paper 'Capital, Crisis and the State', written in 1976 by John Holloway and Sol Picciotto for the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE).

They reproached both of the above-mentioned theoretical approaches for not seeing the state in its historical context. Basing any theory of state on the remarks of Engels' Origins of Family, Private Property and State was not useful, if we want to understand how the modern state works. It is not sufficient to declare the state to be an instrument of domina- tion of one class over another. Such generalization does not explain the particular character of the capitalist state. Its historically unique feature is its separation from the econ- omy. Thus the political, the rule of law and abstract equality, stands in a contradiction to the economic area of class ex- ploitation.

The proponents of the 'state form' theory criticised the func- tionals for taking the fact of an external state 'intervening in the economy' for granted. This is historically unfounded since a feudal or any earlier type of state appeared to the lower classes as a unified oppressive force, integrating both economic and political moments. The economic and political position of any person in the feudal pyramid was identical. Only the development of capital as a social relationship, embodied in the free sale of labour power as a commodity, brings about the separation of the political sphere from the economic. Why? The sale and purchase of labour power has got a double character. On one hand, it is direct exploi- tation, violence of one class over the other. On the other hand, it is a free contract of commodity exchange, one of them being labour power. This voluntary contractual aspect is crucial, without it no sale of working time and production of capitalist value would be possible, hence no capitalism.

This makes the capitalist form of class exploitation different from the previous ones. While a feudal lord disposed of both the 'economic' and 'legal' power to keep the serf fixed to his piece of land (to maintain the reproduction of the social classes), a capitalist does not need to force a worker to stay in the job. The abstract character of labour allows for a free labour turnover. In cases when workers question their social position as a class (social reproduction is threatened) such as in strikes, road blockades or mass avoidance of work, the capitalists have 'subcontracted' the dirty use of violence to an external institution -- the state. The existence of the state as an external rule of law is thus dependent on the capital relation and the reproduction of the state depends on the reproduction of the capital relation. With the abolition of capital, the external 'above our heads' state ceases to exist.

From the fact that the state is essential for the production and reproduction of capital as a social relation (via the guar- antee and supervision of the contract), Holloway and Pic- ciotto go on to prove that it is an effective tool of the state as a form of social relations too. They built on Marx's unique approach to classical categories of political economy (capital, money, wage, credit, rent, etc.) which saw them as fetishized separate objects and at the same time as inter- nally connected forms of social relationships. The 'Process of capitalist production gives rise to forma- tions, in which the vein of internal connections is increas- ingly lost, the production relations are rendered independent of one another and the component values become ossified into forms independent of one another' (Capital, Vol. III, p. 828).

Like other social forms, the state too exists in its double dimension -- as a social form and as a fetishized thing (the state apparatus) at the same time.

In and Against the State

In 1979 one CSE group published the book 'In and Against the State' which elaborated an anti-state theory down to the level of strategies and real experiences of state workers and their clients. Community groups, service users, tenants, trade unions, etc. in the UK at that time were de- manding various forms of state intervention. The most com- mon demands were to improve social service provision (homeless, youth, access to council housing, etc.) and to stop bureaucratic or humiliating forms of the existing provi- sion such as housing waiting lists, means-testing, delays in benefits, non-cohabitation rules for single mothers, etc. Community and social workers were among those best placed to see how any state-led solutions actually deepened working class dependency on the state. For example new legal advice centres had been opened on estates but the casework form of state intervention was fragmenting the response of working class people into following individual procedures. Radical community workers were often instru- mental in this. How to be an anti-capitalist directly at work, if you are a teacher, nurse, social or community worker em- ployed by the state?

'In and Against the State' creatively assimilated the dual perspective of the state as a social form and an apparatus (the fossil of previous class struggles): 'The problem of working in and against the State is precisely the problem of turning our routine contact with the State apparatus against the form of social relations which the apparatus is trying to impose upon our actions.' The welfare state is seen not as a meta-structure imposing external constraints on our agency, but as a flexible result of constant class struggle, of everyday state activity as well as activity of the working
class in general and state workers in particular. The state apparatus is a two-tiered apparatus of state workers, governing the economic and political sectors, respectively. The role of state apparatus workers is to maintain the integrity of the state as a social relation and the economic structure. They are divided into two categories: central state workers and state workers in the productive sector.

The central state workers are responsible for maintaining the stability of the state as a social relation. They are divided into two categories: central state workers and state workers in the productive sector.

The productive state workers are responsible for maintaining the economic structure of the state. They are divided into two categories: central state workers and state workers in the productive sector.

Conclusions

The movement against the cuts, which is now just beginning, seems to be built on a very similar model as the movement against the cuts in the 1970s. The present movement is more fragmented and the numbers of activists are much smaller, so why should the outcome be different?

From the left are surprisingly limited: taxing financial transactions, nationalisation, workers' control over banks and the strategic economy, support for productive capital, protectionism, cutting military budgets, green jobs, the cooperative or social economy, etc.

I see the major weakness of these demands in the fact that they are limited to the state and the productive sector. It provides our subjective desires for living in a society that is more possible and that the future survival of humans is conditioned by the existence of capitalism. It provides us with the means to change the state and the productive sector.

But why should a society without state and classes be desirable for everybody living from their own work? In the UK people have been shaped by the 'good old days' of the welfare state. They still remember it and if pushed to choose, the majority of people would prefer it back.

Why should a society without state and classes be desirable for everybody? If the state is seen not as an agent of the market forces, there is no need for the state to be a part of the productive sector. It provides the means for us to control the state and the productive sector.

We should also argue to turn the Committees outward to open the movement more broadly. The Committees need to be open and democratic and the state workers need to be included.

Within local Anti-Cuts Committees and within any national networks or organisations we should make sure that democratic methods are applied - no slates [1], no take-overs. We should also argue to turn the Committees outwards to open the movement more broadly.

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cuts and the state debate

proposed principles for anti cuts campaigns

Dave Spencer has advanced this piece on how we should approach the fight against cuts as a motion to the Communist party's forthcoming conference. The Coalition government has made a conscious political decision to attack public sector workers and public services. The attack might well be compared to Thatcher's attack on the miners in the 1980s. The aim is to sell off public assets and private services and to discipline the working class. The political basis is classical neo-liberalism, Thatcherite, IMF Washington Consensus, discipline of the markets and market forces, There Is No Alternative etc.

Any response from the working class must therefore also move between the political and the economic. If we take the separation 'politics/economics' or 'private/public' (base/superstructure as a model) as our starting understanding of political economy, we impose limits on our future resistance. So we constrain ourselves within the limits of state and the production of value.

We are losing sight of any communist tendency in the material struggle against the changing state. The left sends as a signal to the working class: 'you folks may experience your everyday problems with jobs, debts, housing or prices in your unity – as one shitty life – but we, along with the state, will continue to channel your struggles into two separate forms and prevent you from challenging the organisation of society as a whole'.

Seeing the state as a form of social relations means that its development can be grasped only as a moment of a development of the totality of social relations, with their core centred in the changing mode of production. This might help to understand the apparent paradox of the austerity re-gimes: Why does the local state in the Wirral want to save £8 million on service provision but is going to invest £20 million in new buildings providing centralised and more automated services? What about the similar paradox in the Royal Mail? If the state is seen not as an agent of this broader restructuring (thus a target that can be pushed or replaced by the popular mobilisation) but as its necessary part and precondition, we start to pose a deeper question of a movement against restructuring, against commodification of our social relations as such. Such a perspective allows us to see real material links between state workers and private sector workers, between the productive and service sectors, much better than the rhetorical expressions of solidarity between the fragmented unions.

It's not easy to say what the role of communists in the present limited movement should be. I think that some of the questions and conclusions in the above mentioned state debate from the 1970s provide a useful theoretical framework that might help to avoid the political trap of the minimum consensus programmes – defend the services, join the union… (Of course, the state changed massively within the last 30 years, especially under the New Labour: the even more perfect integration of trade unions, new divisions inside the working class, new services and needs covered by the state, the circulation into the service provision, workplace programmes, etc. What are the exact changes and their implications for the struggle against the austerity regimes?)

As I have tried to show, Holloway and Picciotto saw the state as a form of the social relations of capital. This approach allows us to see the state above society as a historical, temporary relation, conditioned by the existence of capital. It provides us with subjective desires for living in a society without oppression with a solid materiality.

But why should a society without state and classes be desirable for everybody living from their own work? In the UK people have been shaped by the 'good old days' of the welfare state. They still remember it and if pushed to choose, the majority of people would prefer it back. However, the crisis in 2010 is different from 1979 and the 'C word' has more meanings today.

Whilst the idea of a return to the welfare society might be very common, it seems an unlikely option for the world organised by capital. As Sander from International Perspective points out [1], the austerity measures will just increase productive overcapacity worldwide, only pushing capital into new financial bubbles, into new financial speculation again, into new debts and more austerity again. He thinks that one survival measure for capital will be to raise profits by lowering wages. This means increasing the numbers of working class across the world, creating an oversupply of labour power on the world market and pushing wages under the value of labour power. The fact that paying wages under the value of labour power destroys labour power is not a limit when that labour power is abundant. As any over-produced commodity, labour power must devalorise. This cannot be resisted from within the logic of capital. Resisting thus becomes in practice refusing to be a commodity, rejecting the value-form.'

I like his approach for it connects a pessimistic analysis of the crisis with an argument for communism. It is put forward as a material necessity rather than previous well-known appeals to the 'dialectical' progress of history.

Even if Sander was wrong, I find this an inspiring attempt to develop a case for communism, the most recent 'meltdown' which allows us to develop a series of immediate communist arguments within the movement against cuts. We need this new language, clear and powerful images against wage labour, that we could help circulate through the waves of struggle: taking directly to proletarian hearts, bypassing the traditional Labour/Left filters and defences.

I think that a communist intervention should be informed by the two, already mentioned, theoretical inputs.

First, that putting any defensive demands to the state means moving between the categories of the political and economic or base/superstructure and staying within the cycle of bourgeois forms and life under capital. It's the job of others, not communists, to do so!

And second, that the return to the Keynesian state is no more possible and that the future survival of humans is conditioned on our collective refusal to act as commodities on the labour market.

Let me finish with a speculation that while the first insight was theoretically and practically proven by the state debate and the defeat of the European class-based social movements at the end of the 1970s, the second thesis has to be fought for and practically proven to be true in the here and now, given the general capitalist and environmental may-hem facing us.

[1] See 'Artificial Scarcity in a World of Overproduction: An Escape that Isn't', at metamute.org

[2] There Is No Alternative graphic on the labour party website: they will try and 'capture' the movement and who will present themselves as the elite leadership of the Campaigns.

The political line of these people will be reformist and Keynesian. We must remember that both of these groups failed to build an alternative to New Labour over 15 years and in the case of the Socialist Workers' Party and Socialist Party actively sabotaged the Socialist Alliance and the Scottish Socialist Party. They will be unable to form the broad, open and democratic movement that is required. This will present genuine militants with a dilemma. It is to be hoped that the movement will build up such a momentum that the people above will be swamped.

Within local Anti-Cuts Committees and within any national networks or organisations we should make sure that democratic methods are applied - no slates [1], no take-overs. We should also argue to turn the Committees outwards to open the movement more broadly. The Committees need to be open and democratic and the state workers need to be included.

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organise candidates from the Campaigns to be put forward in local wards, avoid clashes between different left groups. Organise groups of people to go out regularly canvassing, asking the working class what is happening, what they are thinking and what needs to be done in their area. To be dangerous here, this needs to be done now, not three weeks before the election. It is a medium-term strategy, thinking of the general election in 2015 (or before). Elections are a way of getting your voice heard.

[1] a reference to the practice of proposing a 'state' of candidates for election, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, as opposed to negotiating individual candidates.

potere operaio: the last firebrands

In August we staged a series of forums on what we can learn from past communist organisations. Martine Bourne reports on the discussion about Italian group Potere Operaio

Potere Operaio (Workers Power) were the focus of the second meeting of the series organised by the London group on communist organisation and class struggle. Potere Operaio emerged in 1967 as a group of students and street fighting workers standing together within the Communist Party-led CGIL trade union during internal elections at the Petrochimico company based in the industrial zone of Venice, Porto Marghera. From there they built themselves into a radical organisation which at its height had 10,000 activists, but by 1973 had split.

Italy had come out of the Second World War defeated and spent the next 10 years rebuilding its economy and moving away from small scale workshops to mass production factories. The Communist Party of Italy (PCI) played its part supporting the disarming of the anti-fascist resistance and supporting the restructuring of industry. This represented the origin of the post war crisis in the PCI. With Stalin surrendering Western Europe to US influence, the PCI on the one hand accommodated itself to the Italian state, while experiencing marginalisation under US pressure to separate the trade union movement into political unions to distance communist militants from the rest of the working class.

The PCI was pessimistic about the new industrial workers who migrated from the countryside to the industrial zones, believing they lack the required class consciousness of the older generation. The PCI were also far more optimistic of the PCI provided space for Potere Operaio (PO) and other groups like Lotta Continua (Permanent Struggle) to develop theory and organisation within the vacuum.

From the beginning PO were influenced and worked with leftist intellectuals. The most notable being Antonio Negri. potere operaio sought to organise above and beyond workplace and trade union structures

Negri was critical of both the unions and the leftist parties for their participation in the restructuring of Italy. What Negri argued was required was the party of insurrection to resolve the conflict between workers and the state. While Negri's writings have been translated into English, those of the workers within PO have not. This is a pity as it would have given a voice to the organisation's workplace activists and a greater insight into their practice.

From the Porto Marghera base Potere Operaio linked up with other like minded groups that by 1969 formed a national organisation and paper. While Negri wanted to build the organisation there was a tension with the workplace militants who focused on the economic struggle. The CGIL expelled the PO activists from the union as they would not toe the line union. This allowed for the development of autonomous workers bodies free of the unions. This gave PO the space to develop their practice.

They tried to move away from union and political party model of organising and representing workers interests to encouraging workers themselves to take the initiative. The demise of the flat rate pay agreements taught PO how to defend the hierarchical pay and grade structures and sectionalism between blue and white collar workers which assisted the employers and the unions to divide the workforce on narrow sectional lines. Less work, more wages was a slogan adopted to distinguish themselves from the unions and that too much work kills which was literally true in the chemical industry.

Negri's desire to develop the existing organisation into an insurrectionary party saw Potere Operaio organise on the 'terrain' outside of the factory. There were campaigns to drive down transport costs, rent, electricity bills, wages for housework, squatting empty houses and mass shoplifting.

But what was cost of all this activity? A clip of a DVD, "Porto Marghera - The Last of the Firebrands", the story of Potere Operaio, was given showing the human side of the struggle. Augusto Finzi, one of the activists in the Petrochimico plant spoke of the time that work and political activity took him away from his wife and child which led them to split up. The activist culture mirrored the factory in that people did not exist beyond their usefulness to the project. And then work making people sick through poor health and safety and the employer's own health checks used to get rid of workers. Finzi's own experience led him to his own interest in herbal medicines and healthy foods to counter the damaging health impacts of work, chemicals and poor diet.

The trajectories of Finzi and Negri explain why Potere Operaio split as a national organisation in 1973. Finzi favoured insurrectionary workers control and opposed taking up arms. Negri favoured a 'Leninist' insurrectionary party. Events speeded up and some former members of PO took up the armed struggle with the Red Brigades and Prima Linea. The Italian secret state adopted the 'Strategy of tension' using the secret service and their Gladio network with fascist elements to create an environment potentially condu- cive to a right-wing resurgence against PO activists and others. Both Finzi and Negri found themselves imprisoned in 1979 due to the activities of the Red Brigades.

Potere Operaio's legacy for communists today is not only the need to be able to operate independently of the trade unions within the workplace and take the struggle into the community, but also the need to ask ourselves whether own practices mirror the exploitative values we are striving to replace.


>> FROM MELTDOWN TO UPHEAVAL >>>

A Conference of Working-Class Reflection and Action, London, Saturday September 11th

The Commune are hosting a conference to debate the effects of the crisis, the existing resistance and the questions it raises regarding how we organise.

All welcome. We will be soliciting and publishing local and industry-specific reports in the lead-up to the event, see www.thecommune.co.uk for example reports and a local questionnaire. Workshop details below.

Invitation

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 re-vealed its antagonistic class core. These mass protests are mobilisations.

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 mobilisations – and their repercussions and impulses as part of class totality in today’s wider social context.

1. 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 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.

2. The Local Impact

The second thread will depend largely on 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 -

- 'The current struggle against job cuts and factory closures'
- 'Workplace reports: crisis and re-structuring'
- 'The impact of the crisis on housing and public services'
- 'Is the university a factory?'
- 'Effects of the crisis on the unemployed and the benefits regime'

3. The Practical Steps

Revolutionary activity has to be reflection in practical terms, actions in action. We want to discuss about the role of, e.g., solidarity groups during workplace struggles (Vestas, Victor, etc.), about the importance and form 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 ad-


dvice, squatting. So far work ‘with’ migrant workers, tenants, claimants, neighbourhood inhabitants, co-workers etc. have sat side-by-side – we want to try to debate our experiences as part of class totality in today’s wider social context.

Workshops on:

- 'How to form workplace collectives'
- 'How to support ongoing struggles: strikers, migrants and tenants'
- 'Means of intervention and generalisation: the role of publications, an online presence, workplace bulletins and local papers'
- 'How to do interviews and reports'
- 'Solidarity networks: an assessment of the current state and role of the “really-existing rank-and-file” (shop stewards, tenants’ associations etc.)?

4. Future Coordination

We hope that the debates during the conference can result in some 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 circu-

lation; of detailed ‘work-place interviews’ with people in our political scene; or a committee engaged in putting to-
gether a basic pamphlet around the question of ‘how to struggle against job cuts’, which could be adapted for par-
ticular local cases.

10am-7pm on September 11th @
LARC, Fieldgate St, London E1.
As the miners' struggle subsided, another front opened as the London dock strike subsided, unofficial action by workers out on their behalf. The Shipping Federation imposed a lockout as punishment for the strikers' resistance. Wales was violently dispersed by police and troops. Workers from amongst seamen, dockers and railway workers in the transport strikes of 1911 were stoked largely unofficial conflict over pay when Southamton seafarers refused to board ships unless their wages were increased. The action spread to Hull, Goole, Manchester and Liverpool, and soon extended to dockers, many of whom shared the same draconian employer. Groups of factory workers from the area joined in with demands centring on wages and union recognition.

At the same time as strikes were spreading in the North, a new wave of unrest began among London dockers. Here the employers, intimidated by the unrest, offered more generous agreements, but the mood of militancy had spread. Dockers rejected a significant pay increase; as Ben Tillett wrote, "They wanted more..."

As the London dock strike subsided, unofficial action by railway workers on Merseyseide began, sparked by static wages and the slow-moving "conciliation" system for dealing with disputes. In July 1912, workers went on rail workers, whose work in dockland railway depots meant close connections with dockers and seafarers, walked out. Before long an unofficial strike committee had been convened and rapidly set about organising sympathy strikes by other transport workers. By 10th August 15,000 railway workers were on strike, with the official strike committee had been convened and rapidly set about organising sympathy strikes by other transport workers. By 10th August 15,000 railway workers were on strike, with the official strike committee having been convened and rapidly set about organising sympathy strikes by other transport workers. By 15th August 15,000 railway workers were on strike, with the official strike committee having been convened and rapidly set about organising sympathy strikes by other transport workers.

In June and July 1912, yet another dock strike broke out in Dundee, and the接下来 strike's eventual collapse at the end of July was due largely to this employer intransigence, but lack of solidarity from the provinces was another factor. At the same time, the continued vitality of the Great Unrest was indicated by a strike by Merseyseide strikers in July 1912, the same month the London dock strike ended.

The delegate-based structures of the workplace committees set up on the Clyde and beyond allowed for forms of direct democracy and independence from trade union officials crucial to the beginnings of consciously revolutionary organisation amongst rank and file workers.

In 1913 and 1914, unrest broke out in unrelated areas, primarily engineering and building but also amongst agricultural labourers, municipal employees and china clay workers. In the North-East, the railway workers' sabotage of mail services was followed by a strike in the conurbation of the Tyne and Wear, with shunting stoppages stoked largely by unofficial conflict over pay when Southamton seafarers refused to board ships unless their wages were increased. The action spread to Hull, Goole, Manchester and Liverpool, and soon extended to dockers, many of whom shared the same draconian employer. Groups of factory workers from the area joined in with demands centring on wages and union recognition.

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“Minority Movement”, rendering already-existing activity misguided and relatively neglected – episode in labour history but, of course, to examine its political significance. In doing so, pride of place must be given to the central role of syndicalism.

While one key history (Bob Holton, syndicalism for the 21st century?) suggests, the Great Unrest was noteworthy not only for its volcanic workplace-based revolt against capital but for the role of rank and file leaders whose political perspectives extended far beyond the language of compromise and negotiation. In outlining these events, therefore, the intention is not only to draw attention to an important – and relatively neglected – episode in labour history but, of course, to examine its political significance. In doing so, pride of place must be given to the central role of syndicalism.

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for creative and critical thinking on the left

Eleanor Davies, a member of Permanent Revolution, proposes joint forums and a culture of openness

Permanent Revolution members attended The Commune’s recent summer school and found it to be a day of open discussion with many committed activists. One of the things that stuck out most was the number of people who wanted to talk about taking the day forward in terms of working together with a common goal of rebuilding the movement.

The plenary session was opened by Chris Ford of The Commune who made the point that, as we approach a period where the working class will come under the savage attack of the Con-Dem government, the left is marginalised to the point where we have very little influence in any sphere of society. The idea of ‘communist regroupment’ was posed and met with favourable if cautious response.

Most people at the school had been involved in community and workplace struggles where people and groups from different traditions worked together to achieve the campaign goal. One example of this in London is the UBS bank cleaners dispute where a solidarity group was set up to support the cleaners struggle. The group operated in an open democratic manner meeting fortnightly and taking responsibility for the demos and actions.

At no point did any group try to take over the campaign or use it as a recruitment ground. The goal of the campaign (to support the cleaners in their struggle for trade union recognition and securing their pay and terms and conditions) was always at the forefront and never overshadowed by this or that group’s ideology of building their numbers. Neither were the meetings ever dominated by any individual or group.

Many political issues were raised throughout the struggle: immigration, the trade union bureaucracy, how decision and securing their pay and terms and conditions was use it as a recruitment ground. The goal of the campaign (to support the cleaners in their struggle for trade union recognition and securing their pay and terms and conditions) was always at the forefront and never overshadowed by this or that group’s ideology of building their numbers. Neither were the meetings ever dominated by any individual or group.

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Many political issues were raised throughout the struggle: immigration, the trade union bureaucracy, how decision-making should be carried out, nationalism – but although our day-to-day work was well co-ordinated and comradely the opportunity to discuss those issues did not arise and as a consequence we each went back to our groups and had the discussions there, missing the possibility of developing common ideas together.

In light of this Permanent Revolution have sent a proposal to various groups including The Commune, the Republican Communist Network and Liberty and Solidarity where we have put forward the idea of having more formal political discussions in order that, as we continue to work together, we also clarify and discuss our differences and agreements in an honest and open manner.

We propose holding a roundtable discussion process of political issues of Marxist/Communist politics aimed at clarifying differences, removing prejudices and confusion and facilitating closer cooperation in both theoretical and practical activities.

We suggest holding joint meetings in regions and cities where we are present around the above political issues (or any other) in order to develop local forums, which could also work together practically. We could aim to bring the participants from these forums together nationally at a summer school in 2011.

This proposal should not be seen as an attempt of one group trying to take over another, or one group trying to impose its ‘line’ upon another. Rather it is about achieving unity through a process of political discussion. There is little point in PR having an internal discussion to arrive at an agreement, which we then have to convince others of. The spirit of this proposal is more about coming together to form political co-operation amongst different groups and individuals.

We are also activists and the more co-operation in our activities the more effective we will be. Campaigns are not there to be controlled by groups or individuals but there to be won and in that process rebuild the labour movement. Through practical political activity trust is built. You are more likely to trust a comrade who stands firm with you on a picket line or when standing face-to-face with the EDL than you are if the only time you come across that comrade is in a meeting room (however few your political differences may be). In other words political discussion and political activism go hand-in-hand.

The political discussion often arises out of the political struggle. For instance during the UBS cleaners struggle where the cleaners were coming up against the obstacles of the Unite bureaucracy the issue of new unions and our attitude towards them arose. Some people felt that it would be better to leave Unite and set up a new union, which would not be hampered by Unite’s regulations. On the other hand there were people who felt that it would be better to stay in the union, that it would be a mistake to abandon the union at this time without the support of a significant movement within the union. But how could we develop such a political collaborative process?

Anti-cuts committees are springing up all over the country and we have the opportunity to work together. These are arenas where these ideas can be tested and defended. Groups and individuals will still be able to produce their own publications and propaganda.

We are proposing this as a framework for co-operation and co-ordination as communists and we would hope for the involvement of as many seriously interested groups as possible. We reject top-down control and want to build co-operation on bottom-up activity. To this end we should avoid rushing into co-ordinating committees or delegate meetings. Activity is key – this is not an attempt to set up a discussion group for the sake of talking but rather where we can test out our unity in practical terms.

Of course there have been many attempts at unity, which have ended in failure, and in the end this is because in fact they have been set up as attempts to build mini-parties, which are then used as recruitment pots. The spirit of this proposal is in fact rebuilding a movement and the left needs to be united if we are in any way to be taken seriously by the working class. Networks are good but in reality there are several good networks around, we can call round several activists for support at this demo or that rally and generally this is successful, but we need to start thinking about something more concrete. We need to develop a common outlook, which has come out of the lessons of struggles we have worked together in.

We want to bring together activists who are prepared to fight against oppression in a spirit of mutual confidence and support and trust. Such a framework requires creative and critical thinkers who are honest, loyal and trustworthy. However we believe that unity includes an element of disobedience whilst bringing together people who know and believe in the value of collective decision-making and who are determined to bring fundamental and revolutionary change to our society. We want to build a disciplined but free association of Marxists.

We must rid ourselves of the fetishisation of our own groups. There does not appear to be a single group in existence which contains the seed of a revolutionary party. We are a long way from having a revolutionary party that is necessary for our class. Working class fightback. It is a stepping-stone towards building a revolutionary party that is necessary for our class.