

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



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For a workers' government

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Picture:
Budget Day protest, 21 March,
Downing Street, London



What is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists' relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.



Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses.

Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

We stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
- Open borders.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.
- If you agree with us, please take some copies of *Solidarity* to sell — and join us!

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Teachers' pensions fight: next steps

By Martin Thomas

Activists of the National Union of Teachers and the UCU in London have worked hard to get a good turn-out for the regional one-day strike on 28 March over the Government's pension changes called by their union leaders after those leaders had overruled member surveys showing big majorities for a national strike.

The indications are for a reasonable showing. Much better could have been achieved if the London strike had been called as part of the national strike, together with other unions, which was on the cards until the NUT Executive on 14 March cancelled it — leading to domino-effect cancellations by UCU, PCS,

NIPSA, and EIS.

Much better could have been got if the strike had been called as a prompt response to the Government's 19 December terms rather than after four months' loss of momentum since 30 November.

From 28 March, the only realistic and serious next step forward is a decision by the NUT's Easter conference (6-10 April) to:

- set a national strike day now, for early as possible in the third term, and campaign to get the PCS, UCU, Unite, EIS, and NIPSA out on the same

day. This is possible. PCS, Unite, and NIPSA are already talking of a strike in "late April", and PCS leaders will be under pressure from their members to display some action before their union conference in May.

● formulate plans now for a quick-tempo rolling programme of regional and selective strikes, sustained by strike levies, to follow the national strike.

● put out those plans to wide democratic discussion in the union, including in democratic strike meetings on the national strike day;

and organise strike committees in every area jointly with other unions continuing the campaign.

● formulate precise and credible demands on the Government.

It will be difficult to restart the campaign now even with the best policy. But it is possible.

We need to build a rank-and-file network in the NUT which will provide space for democratic debate of strategy when the official union channels do not allow it, and enable local activists to come together to exert organised pressure on the supposedly "left" Executive and general secretary, and where necessary campaign in an organised way across the union for alternative strategies.

How dare they call us "unskilled"?

My Life at Work

Catherine Miller works in refuse collection for a major local authority in southern England.

Tell us a little bit about the work you do.

I work for a local council. My department is responsible for the refuse and recycling collections, and the street cleaning for the City. I work in the office as an administrator; I pay invoices, do the filing, provide admin support to the Project Officers...

Do you and your workmates get the pay and conditions you deserve?

Definitely not. I am on the same salary as the operational staff, as both their and my job is deemed "unskilled", which I find quite offensive. While most people are still in bed, they are out there in all weathers, carrying out dirty, physically demanding work. It's an essential service, and I think it should be financially recognised as such.

Due to Equal Pay legislation, the Council tried to cut our wages two years ago. Many women within in the Council such as teaching assistants and dinner ladies lodged equal pay claims as they thought that men doing similar jobs got paid more than they did.

So the Council's answer to this conundrum, instead of raising the wages of the female workers, was to look at a traditionally male domain (us), and attempt to cut our wages by up to £8,000. We went on strike over this and got them to back down.

Nationally, public sector pay has been frozen while the cost of living has risen. We live in the South East, the most expensive part of the country outside of London, yet our wages do not reflect this. Depending on length of service, the average pay in my department is about £15,000. Everyone struggles and most people here have a second job.

Our working conditions are dangerous, and the majority of issues we have here are about health and safety, as we work with HGV vehicles and hazardous substances. Most of the bosses disregard a lot of health and safety matters.

How has the recent political situation, the economic crisis and the cuts, affected your work?

We have had our pay frozen for the last two years, and our pensions attacked. It's difficult to really make direct cuts to our service as people always need to have their rubbish collected.

However, in the most recent Council budget they decided to stop using agency staff, which had a massive impact on us as we rely on agency staff to cover annual leave and sickness.

If we don't have that then the remaining staff are expected to take on the additional work — we currently have a grievance pending regarding this issue.

What do people talk about in your workplace?

Usual stuff — TV, sport.

And the job itself. It's easy to talk politics because we work for local government, so people will talk about what specific councillors or parties are up to.

What are your bosses like? Is there a problem with bullying and harassment by bosses?

Definitely. The bosses are facing pressure to meet service demands when they have less equipment and less staff, so they take that out on the workers. We conduct a workplace survey every year and one of the results of it showed that over 40% of our staff feel bullied by managers. It's a massive issue.

Is there a union in your workplace, and does it do a good job?

Yes, we're in the GMB. When workers ask "what's the GMB going to do about this?" we always reply "what do you want to do about this?" — the union is what the members make it.

We have 100% membership at our workplace, including agency staff, which I'm proud of. We have a strong culture of unionisation and have done for many years.

We have quite a few shop stewards and we have one elected senior shop steward who is on full time release from his job to be a rep full time, which we negotiated. Workers know never to go into any meeting with the bosses without representation. Most of our time is spent on casework, as we have nearly 400 staff here.

We have won some pretty big victories over pay and working conditions by going on strike, both officially and unofficially.

When we refused to go out to work a while ago (unofficially) over an over-

time issue, everyone regularly met in the canteen to talk about the dispute and vote on what we were going to do about it, or to hear the latest feedback from management. By contrast, on the national pensions issue, most workers haven't got a clue what's going on and don't feel that they have any democratic say in the dispute.

A lot of workers don't trust our main branch, as they feel they have sold them out over a few things, so we always ensure that we have regular mass meetings in our workplace, and vote on decisions, so workers know it is us that is in charge of the dispute, rather than the branch. None of the workforce gets involved at branch level or goes to branch meetings. It's not perfect, though. We have massive problems with racism and sexism in our workforce, which is a constant battle to fight.

If you could change one thing about your work, what would it be?

Democratic, workers' control! I believe that we know how to do the job better than the bosses do: a lot of our vehicles break down all the time; we're told that our department doesn't have the money to buy more, yet they recently spent tens of thousands on management consultants to draw us a new logo!

Our workers know the job better than anyone else, and would make the best decisions for the benefit of residents and the workforce.

If I couldn't get that, then I would like to see everyone's pay greatly increased. We deserve it.

Greece: 25 March clampdown fails to stifle protests

By Theodora Polenta

Fearing a repetition of the revolt during the parades last year on 28 October (anniversary of Greek rejection of Italy's ultimatum in World War 2), Greece's political establishment left nothing to chance with the celebrations of 24-25 March (anniversary of the start of the Greek revolution of 1821).

The right to protest was banned for the day. From the morning of 24 March, Athens resembled a war zone, with its citizens being excluded from all areas around the parade route and public transport halted for whole areas.

Seven thousand policemen were mobilised to protect the politicians that were going to attend the parade. Armed men were standing at the parliament building, ready to shoot if an "unexpected provocation occurred".

The police was given unconditional licence by the government and the minister for Citizen Protection to arrest left-wing activists for "precautionary" reasons before the parade took place.

Unionised members of Athens Council's band were threatened with disciplinary action or sacking if they were to participate in even symbolic protests against the government

during the parade. On 28 October they had paraded wearing black armbands to protest against cuts, redundancies, and wage cuts. Both the student parade on 24 March, and the military parades on 25 March, took place with little audience beyond members of the political establishment: the prime minister, members of his cabinet, other political leaders, president Karolos Papoulias, religious figures and high-ranking members of the military. Only family friends and affiliates of the political establishment were allowed to attend the parade.

Parents who wished to watch their kids parading on 24 March were allowed to do so only at a great distance. Some of the parents had to use binoculars.

There were measures similar to those in Athens, albeit less extreme, in every part of Greece with a parade. The parade route was heavily policed and precautionary arrests of left wing activists took place prior to the parades. A police buffer protected the political representatives from the public. In Thessaloniki the public was not allowed within 100 metres of the politicians' platform.

But the politicians were still confronted with the anger of Greek society.

The students paraded,

but symbolically refused to follow the custom of turning their heads to the right towards the platform where the politicians, military, and religious leaders were standing.

Disabled war veterans refused to participate in the official parade.

In Athens, left wingers and teachers managed to break the police lines and get close to the politicians' platform, chanting anti-cuts slogans: "Bread, Education, and Freedom". 27 of them were arrested.

COUNTER

In Thessaloniki a counter-parade of left-wingers and trade unionists took place. Six were arrested.

In Veria fifteen protesters were arrested for trying to get close to the politicians' platform. Primary and secondary school teachers stated a silent protest against the attacks of the government on education. In Patra, prior to the start of the parade, the police arrested at least 30 protesters. The official parade in Patra was not attended by any member of the government or MP.

In Crete and in Hrakleio the parade was cancelled altogether by police order.

Up North, in Xanthi, police blocked protesters from approaching the parade; two protesters were arrested and a protester was injured and hospitalised.

It is a proof of the defeatist and legalistic attitude of the parliamentary left, KKE and Syriza, that they did not attempt to organise protests.

KKE especially was dismissive about such protest as not measuring up to their standard of "working-class struggle".

Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras said: "We are asking the people who spontaneously wish to protest, and that is their right, to be

cautious. There is a concrete possibility for a provocative action and the potential to utilise the anger and resentment of the majority of the population in favour of the capitalist system".

KKE kept reproducing in its paper *Rizospastis* information coming straight from the conservative press about potential provocations and the preparations of paramilitary right-wing forces.

But the response to the climate of fear and the iron-heel policy of the government should not have been to encourage people to stay at home, but to make the working-class movement sufficiently organised and politically mature to deal with the police. To oppose mobilisation on the grounds of fearing provocation and possible cancellation of the elections due in late April or May will lead to elections taking place in a climate of fear.

The far-left coalition Antarsya and other forces of the revolutionary left organised and led most of the counter-protests.

Antarsya interpreted the counter parades as protests against the government and a warning to the next government.

The government wants us to believe that the decision to call for elections on 29 April or 6 May was its own decision. But both the government and the EU/ECB/IMF Troika would have liked to impose Papademos's unelected and unaccountable government for at least another 18 months.

Working-class people should gain confidence from the fact that through our protests, demonstrations, strikes, and occupations we have won the right to a say, albeit a very limited one, in parliamentary elections.

● To make a donation to help the ISO pay their fines: workersliberty.org/donate

Israel anti-war protest

About 1500 Israelis marched in Tel Aviv on Saturday 24 March to protest against Israeli government talk of bombing Iran's nuclear facilities.

Oppose elected mayors

By Bruce Robinson

In May, there will be referenda in 10 cities, alongside the local government elections, over whether they should have elected mayors.

Socialists should advocate a No vote. The elected mayoral positions remove accountability to either the labour movement or the electorate on anything but a four or five yearly basis, and give the mayors power to override councils in that period.

However the official leaflet I have received seems to be biased in favour of a mayor, posing the issue as one of voters' rights against those of councillors' caucuses.

● bit.ly/mayorleaflet

Europe

By Andrew Smith

London's Tory mayor Boris Johnson has become the latest signatory to the "People's Pledge", a campaign which attempts to get politicians to commit to backing a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union.

The campaign's initiators are right-wing Eurosceptics who think a referendum is the most likely way to achieve British withdrawal from the EU. Their main media outlet is the right-wing *Daily Express*. They dress themselves up by boasting of cross-party, and cross-class, support.

As co-founder Christopher Bruni-Lowe (UKIP general election coordinator in 2010) writes in *Total Politics*, "Seeing is believing: who would have thought Daniel Hannan [right-wing Tory MEP]

and Bob Crow [RMT] would ever share the same platform?"

Who indeed? The spectacle of Bob Crow in alliance with Boris Johnson, who is currently leading an onslaught against RMT members' conditions in London, is obscene.

RMT activists should fight for the immediate withdrawal of their union's support for this rotten alliance.

● More on Eurozone economic crisis: workersliberty.org/ltro

WP split?

By Ken Davies

Rumour has it that the minority on the outgoing committee (i.e. the "old" leadership) won the votes at the conference on 24-25 March of the Workers Power group.

The dispute has been about whether to keep a rigid version of "democratic centralism" (a kitsch-Trotskyist, non-Leninist version as AWL would see it) or look to looser "anti-capitalist alliances". Or, at least, that's what it has been about so far as we can tell from outside the Workers Power group. Unlike the Bolsheviks, or Trotskyist groups of Trotsky's time, WP maintains a public pretence of monolithic uniformity of opinion.

Two people were apparently expelled at the 24-25 March conference, and further rumours have it that younger leading figures in WP, who lost out at the conference, will now break away. I'm told it's unlikely that oppositionists who break away will form a new group.

It would be good to know what the issues are, unlike with the previous Workers Power split in 2006, when a minority broke away to form the Permanent Revolution group without any prior public debate about differences.

Defend Kamal Abbas!

Transport union RMT has written to the Egyptian embassy supporting Egyptian trade unionist Kamal Abbas, who faces jail for "insulting" a member of the regime.

The union letter says: "The RMT is appalled to learn that Kamal Abbas, CTUWS [Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services] general coordinator

has been sentenced in absentia to six months imprisonment... Mr Abbas has been charged with 'insulting a public officer', specifically Ismail Ibrahim Fahmy of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). This does not even seem to be a crime, never mind a matter for incarceration."

The RMT demands the immediate lifting of the threat of imprisonment.

Zimbabwe: "Solidarity works"

Six Zimbabwean socialists have just been convicted of "inciting public violence" for organising a meeting about the Egyptian revolution, but to general surprise were given fines and community service instead of prison sentences. Mike Sambo, National Treasurer of the International Socialist Organisation of Zimbabwe, and the defendant in another trial related to that of the six, spoke to *Solidarity*.

From the outset it seemed that the state wanted to

send the comrades to jail.

When the magistrate delivered the guilty verdict, he sounded very confident. But the next day there were demonstrations all over the world, and campaigns of phone calls to Zimbabwean ministries. And we organised impressive mobilisations in Zimbabwe too.

Prime minister Morgan Tsvangirai [leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, now in a coalition with Mugabe] put out a statement saying he was shocked by the magistrate's decision, and that cit-

izens should not be sent to prison for watching a video. We were surprised, because during the trial the prosecution made a big effort to push a wedge between us and the MDC, stressing our criticisms of Tsvangirai.

The protests must also have had some effect on the magistrate, or those giving him orders, as when he came back to deliver the sentence his tone had changed. I think this is a case of solidarity, of people's power working.

The defence lawyers have put up an appeal to the

High Court against both the convictions and the sentences. But the prosecution are boycotting the appeal in order to string things out until 31 March, which is when the community service and the fines kick in.

We need help to pay the \$3,000 the comrades have been fined. But what we value most of all is the kind of active, visible solidarity we saw last week.

Ken Livingstone and anti-semitism

The Left

By Ira Berkovic

A letter from prominent Jewish Labour Party supporters to party leader Ed Miliband, leaked to the press around 21 March, has expressed some profound concerns following a 1 March meeting between party activists and London mayoral candidate Ken Livingstone.

The letter's authors are by no means left-wingers. They criticise Livingstone for being too stridently hostile to what he considers "bourgeois" elements (if only!) and characterise his politics as "infantile far-left". But one does not have to endorse the wider politics of the authors to conclude that most of their criticisms of Livingstone's attitudes on Jews and anti-semitism ring true.

The authors point out: "At various points in the discussion Ken used the words Zionist, Jewish and Israeli, interchangeably, as if they meant the same, and did so in a pejorative manner. These words are not interchangeable and to do so is highly offensive, particularly when repeated over and over again as was done. For example, when discussing Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi's extreme views on homosexuality, Ken said 'one would expect the same views on homosexuality from extreme Christians, Muslims and Israelis', and used the word 'Zionist' as an adjectival negative to criticise much more widely than what can be attributed to the ideology of Zionism."

At the meeting Livingstone also reportedly defended his

links to Iranian state broadcaster Press TV and his historical support for al-Qaradawi and other Islamists. Livingstone is also alleged to have said that he did not expect many Jews to vote for him anyway, as London's Jews are generally wealthy and Labour's votes are inversely proportional to wealth levels.

The meeting was not officially minuted or recorded, so there is no formal record against which one could verify the criticisms. But it requires no leap of imagination to think them true. In the 1980s Livingstone was a fellow traveller of Gerry Healy's Workers' Revolutionary Party, which raged against a supposed worldwide "Zionist connection", and as late as 1994, when Healy had long been widely dismissed on the left as shady and crazy, Livingstone wrote a puff for an adulatory biography of Healy.

The letter makes an astute point about Jewish cultural identity which many on the left refuse to accept: "It is not an uncontroversial thing to say that for the vast majority of British Jews, Israel plays an important part in their core identity, in the same way that family, language and cultural ties continue to bind BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities with India, Pakistan etc. [...] In the same way that Black, Irish, Women and LGBT groups are afforded the right to determine their own identity, many of us feel that Ken doesn't afford Jews that right. Just as we do not have a right to tell Ken what he thinks about Israel despite our many disagreements, Ken doesn't have the right to define who we believe we are."

Workers' Liberty does not "endorse" the ethno-cultural affinity many diaspora Jews feel with the state of Israel. We are revolutionary socialist internationalists and secularists; we think the state of Israel should be an expression of the national self-determination of the Israeli-Jews who live there, not the national entity of all Jews everywhere. But at

the same time, we are materialists who understand how the historical experience of oppression, persecution and attempted genocide has embedded the state of Israel in Jewish identity. Jewish people — either in Britain or in Israel — will not be won to socialist internationalism by exceptionalising their cultural nationalism as uniquely worse than that of any other cultural or national group.

"Anti-Zionism" as a political point-of-departure, as a distinct political category separate from working-class, internationalist opposition to all nationalisms, and as something more expansive than revolutionary hostility to the ruling class of the state of Israel, has dangerous anti-Semitic implications. Ken Livingstone, in his crude interchanging of "Jewish", "Zionist" and "Israeli", exemplifies them well.

So what conclusions should we draw from the episode? Should we refuse to back Ken Livingstone in the election?

In a way — yes. We do not "back Ken Livingstone"; we want a Labour victory. We call for a vote for Livingstone only because the party he represents is the only significant force in electoral politics with a structural link to organised labour and therefore more potentially susceptible to working-class pressure and subversion than other parties. Preferring a Labour mayor to a Tory one does not imply any positive endorsement of the individual Labour candidate or any obligation to censor our criticisms of his political record.

The fact that the Labour candidate for London mayor manages to combine the worst of New Labour (acquiescence to the business community and slavish devotion to serving the interests of the City) with the worst of crank-left "anti-Zionism" is a further reminder of how much work there is to do to make our movement politically fit for purpose.

● The protest letter: bit.ly/kl-jews. Livingstone's 1994 preface: www.aworldtowin.net/resources/GH.html

Letters

When Rustin went abject

In his younger years Bayard Rustin was a fearless fighter for peace and social justice. That is what should be memorialised. ("Remember Bayard Rustin", Eric Lee, *Solidarity* 239).

The SP, later the SDUSA, of which Rustin became a prominent personality opened another, sadder chapter. The SP melded their concept of coalitionism — of driving the racist Dixiecrat wing from the Democratic party — into an abject apologia for accommodationism.

Rustin had played a major and salutary role in organizing the 1963 civil rights march on Washington, only to betray the movement a year later by working against the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The latter had the utter gall to believe their state delegation to the national Democratic Party convention in 1964 should be integrated. Rustin, in his newly evolved role as point man for the liberal establishment, was instrumental in trying to foist on the MFDP a miserable "compromise" in which it would be allowed observer status but no voting rights.

The younger Rustin, not to mention the once revolutionary Shachtman, would have understood that the bulk (with many honorable and notable exceptions) of American unions at that time resembled in their internal operations the very authoritarian societies, structures and habits that when writ large the cold-war Shachtmans and Rustins opposed.

Rustin's job was to magnify the insignificant token concessions of the labor tops and to market them to the civil rights movement as giant strides forward, while counselling blacks to have patience and above all not to raise demands that might fracture their oh-so precious coalition.

The AFL-CIO cheered the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy's brinkmanship in the Cuban missile crisis, the invasion of the Dominican Republic and Johnson's intensification and escalation of the war in Vietnam. Not until the very end of the Vietnam war labour represented in any meaningful way in any anti-war demonstration.

Rustin and a good portion of the "Democratic Left", as the SP and its labour/liberal allies called themselves, opposed the demands for immediate withdrawal, and were also opposed to the cessation of American bombings of North Vietnam, until "both sides — not just the US" take peace initiatives.

It was never a question of steering the anti-war movement

away from Stalinism; only of wrecking it where possible, diluting it when necessary, lest it threaten the viability of the "coalition" and the social privileges that the coalition preserved.

As the *New York Times* reported in June 15, 1967, Rustin asserted "that the civil rights movement could gain nothing without President Johnson's support, and that the President's support might be diluted if civil rights leaders took strong stands against the Administration's policy in Vietnam."

One could try to put a more elaborate flourish to Rustin's or Shachtman's positions on the war, but in the end they simply offered themselves as tools to the reactionaries within the labor movement until they actually integrated themselves into the world view of that unique form of bureaucratic conservatism.

There is very little that can be salvaged from that legacy.

Barry Finger, *New York*

"Ethnic" block-voters?

In his letter giving his recollections of the debate around the (successful) attempt to ban the Sunderland Polytechnic Jewish Society in the 1980s (*Solidarity* 238), Brian Plainer highlights the "natural bias" of "500-600 mostly overseas Arab/Islamic students", which he believes represented "a significant block vote in favour of banning the Jewish Society".

Brian is on thin ice here. Lazy assumptions about the "natural biases" of a given ethnic, cultural or national group also made up part of the thinking of the "Jew = Zionist = supporter of Israeli government policy" equations in the heads of the pro-ban constituency.

Certainly, it is true that particular views — including reactionary ones — do gain majority or mass currency amongst particular groups, and sometimes for good (or at least understandable) reasons. For example, the basic affinity (however low-level or unformed) that many (perhaps most) Jews feel for the state of Israel is an entirely understandable product of a relatively recent experience of genocide. We argue against such instinctive affinities and strive to replace them with thought-through working-class internationalism, but we try to understand them — sympathetically — and fight attempts to use them to conduct anti-Semitic witch-hunts by way of identifying all Jews with Israeli government policy.

We understand — sympathetically — why students of an Arab or Islamic background might feel an instinctive hostility to Israel. But many go beyond instinct.

And anyway our starting point is working-class internationalism, not the dismissive notion that Arabs will go along with any measure — no matter how reactionary or even racist — that appears to feed into their "natural biases".

Daniel Randall, *east London*

Taking verbiage

The PCS union Executive's statement on why it was overruling the 73% vote from PCS members for a further strike on 28 March against the Government's pension changes promised instead a hope of "industrial action... before the end of April".

Leave aside, for now, the substance of the matter, and consider only the language. We know that the PCS leaders are promising, or suggesting, that PCS members will strike for one day in late April.

Yet the statement never uses the verb "strike". Instead it speaks always of "taking strike action", or "taking industrial action". This usage has become common in the unions.

Partly this is a matter of a general striving for turgid language. Officials and academics think they can seem more self-important and learned by never using a clear single-syllable word when they can instead be opaque and use seven syllables.

There is an extra twist. Taking a break, taking a nap, taking a drink... all convey the idea of a short swerve after which we quickly return to what we were doing before. "Taking strike action" connotes a momentary digression, whereas "striking" is open-ended. To replace the verb "strike" by "take strike action" is to create a presupposition that all strikes are short protests.

As George Orwell put it, the "invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases... can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetises a portion of one's brain".

Alan Gilbert, *North London*

Vote Labour, expel Livingstone

Two bottom lines: vote Labour. And expel Livingstone from the Labour Party.

If poor Eric Joyce can be expelled simply for getting pissed and punching a few Tories, then surely Livingstone's blatant anti-semitism should be sufficient to get him booted out.

I've campaigned and voted for candidates as bad as Livingstone before: Liam Byrne for one. Voting Labour is a class duty, not a petty bourgeois choice. But that doesn't mean we have to tolerate whatever the Party machine serves up. Miliband's defence of Livingstone is disgraceful. Livingstone must be expelled.

But until he is, we must reluctantly vote for him, as the official Labour candidate.

Jim Denham, *Birmingham*

Save the NHS! Block the sell-off law!

More than 80 NHS campaigners met on 21 March at the Unite union offices in London, on the initiative of Health Alarm, to discuss coordination for the defence of the NHS after the Health and Social Care Bill passed through Parliament on 20 March.

Speakers included Wendy Savage from Keep Our NHS Public (KONP) and Helen McFarlane from Unite.

Campaigner after campaigner spoke of their determination to continue the fight to save the NHS. A recurring demand was for a national demonstration in defence of the NHS: the day before, 20 March, the Unite executive had resolved to call on the TUC to organise it. The meeting discussed how to make this happen and how to put pressure on the TUC. Campaigners are also keen to protest against the private profiteers such as Serco, Virgin and Circle.

Some supporters of the Act have warned that implementing it will be difficult in face of the wide public opposition. We can certainly make it difficult, and make it politically impossible for the next Labour government to do other than keep Andy Burnham's promise to reverse "marketisation" under the Act.

The Act allows NHS hospitals to increase the income they get from treating private patients from 2% to 49%. How many hospitals will do that depends on our campaigning.

On 1 March, South West London KONP organised a demonstration against plans by St George's Hospital, Tooting, to spend £100,000 a year on a "Private Patients Development Manager". Similar protests should be organised at hospitals across the country.

From the meeting campaigners will be establishing a Liaison Committee for Rebuilding the NHS. There will be a planning meeting of the Liaison Committee on Saturday 31 March: for details call Rosie on 07734 088 243.

Serco grabs NHS jobs

Within days of the Health and Social Care Bill being passed in the Commons, it was announced that Serco had won a £140 million deal from NHS Suffolk. 1,000 NHS workers will be transferred to the company.

Serco provides second-rate service and lousy workers' rights, but big profits for shareholders. It had an annual operating revenue of £3 billion in 2009. In 2010 it reported an annual increase in pre-tax profits of 34% to £194.7 million. The company employs 100,000 people worldwide.

It runs large parts of what should be or were public services. It is the largest air traffic control company. As well as moving people Serco stops people moving. It is the largest operator of private prisons in Britain. It also provides intelligence to the UK Border Agency and runs an Immigration Removal Centre.

It runs out-of-hours children's services, London's cycle hire scheme, London's Docklands Light Railway, Northern Rail, and Merseyrail train networks. It has a six-year contract to run Ofsted. It looks after Britain's nuclear arsenal.

85-90% of Serco's workforce are former public service employers. How many of Serco's workforce are unionised is hard to establish, but with a workforce of 100,000 across the world, there is potential for international solidarity.

Serco is run by two multi-millionaires, Kevin Beeston and Chris Hyman. Hyman is a born-again Christian. He says: "My whole life, I believe, is driven by God... I'm no genius, what I'm successful for is listening to God".

Serco's head office is in Richmond, Surrey — a pleasant day out for a protest. Watch this space.

The big story

"The Health and Social Care Act is a public health catastrophe. It ends the NHS as we know it. It is the end of a NHS that provides healthcare to all across the country on the basis of need and not on the ability to pay".

This is the verdict of Allyson Pollock, Professor of Public Health at Queen Mary University London.

"Liberating the NHS" was the name of the White Paper that preceded the Health and Social Care Act which was passed through Parliament on 20 March in the face of huge opposition from doctors, other health workers, and the public. The Government will now set about "liberating the NHS" from the principle of free healthcare at the point of need.

David Price, senior research fellow at Queen Mary University London, says: "This law is not about 'cost efficiency'.

"Unite the fight" meeting, 21 March

It's ideological, it's about the welfare state. The government is saying the NHS is no longer sustainable, yet we are richer than ever before... The NHS was conceived of and its architecture designed in the 1940s when Britain was bankrupt, and it was designed to be the most cost efficient health service possible...

"Competition will fragment care and erode trust between patients and the medical profession and within the profession itself. Patients in the future will not know if a doctor is saying this is the best treatment or that is the best drug for commercial reasons or clinical reasons..."

"The cap on advertising is being lifted and money that would have been used for health care will now be used by the new bodies set up as a result of the new law to advertise their services in competition with other service providers".

Pollock says that "research shows that of all the (health-care) systems in the world the NHS is the most efficient... the government has failed to produce any evidence in support of their major changes around competition and marketisation of the NHS. The NHS is funded primarily through our taxes, we all pay for it and we all use it..."

"The government wants to move away from tax funding, which is very fair, to a mixed system of funding, like in America, where the government pays and we increasingly have to pay out of pocket, either through user charges or through taking out more and more private health insurance. That's the big story behind this law..."

Sign the pledge!

Doctors who oppose the Health and Social Care Act have drafted a statement of principle that GPs and local campaigners can press their Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to adopt.

"This CCG will uphold the principle of 'First do no harm': we will take no action and adopt no policy that might undermine our patients' continued access to existing local health services that they need, trust and rely upon.

"In the spirit of clinically-led commissioning, we reserve entirely the right to decide whom we contract with to provide services for our patients. We will take those decisions on the basis of the best interests of our patients and wider local communities, and we will refuse to allow Any Qualified Provider to be imposed on us from above.

"In the interests of transparency we will not engage in any contracts that impose conditions of commercial confidentiality. Once agreed and signed the contract should be open to public scrutiny.

"We will also work an open-book basis with providers and joint commissioners. We will also consult local communities before implementing any changes that affect them, and our Board will make all major decisions relating to services in public session."

Campaign diary

29 March. Camden KONP protest, 1.30pm, at the NHS North and Central London Board meeting, St Pancras Hospital, 4 St Pancras Way, NW1 0PE

29 March. Hackney Coalition to Save the NHS meeting, 7.30pm, Stamford Hill Library, 120 Stamford Hill, N16 6QT

5 April, 12-2pm, noisy protest at Circle Healthcare head office, 32 Welbeck Street, W1G 8EU. Called by Health Alarm

7 April. "Save the NHS" demo, Barnsley. Assemble 9.30am Churchfields, rally in Peel Square

23 June. KONP national conference, Friends Meeting House, Euston.

More: healthalarm1159.wordpress.com

Help the AWL raise £20,000

The six Tory donors whom David Cameron hosted at Downing Street and Chequers donated £23 million to the Conservative Party, their party.

Their vast wealth is what secures them influence in society – not just through donations, dodgy or legit, but through the sheer power that the very possession of such wealth constitutes under capitalism.

Naturally, working-class organisations cannot hope for support from such rich individuals. Our movement has been built collectively out of millions of subscriptions and membership fees from millions of workers, poor or slightly better than poor.

That is true even for a mighty trade union such as Unite or Unison, and more so for a small socialist group such as the AWL. We rely on relatively small amounts of money from people like you. Without it, we cannot challenge the fat bureaucracies of the labour movement, let alone take on the political machine the Tories have built in order to serve the super-rich.

● Taking out a monthly standing order. There is a form at www.workersliberty.org/resources and below

● Making a donation. You can send it to us at the address below (cheques payable to "AWL") or do it online at www.workersliberty.org/donate

● Organising a fundraising event

● Taking copies of *Solidarity* to sell at your workplace, university/college or campaign group.

● Get in touch to discuss joining the AWL.

More information: 07796 690 874 / awl@workersliberty.org / AWL, 20E Tower Workshops, 58 Riley Rd, SE1

3DG.

Total raised so far: £10,741

We raised £416 this week from donations, increased standing orders and new subscriptions.

Standing order authority

To: (your bank)

..... (its address)

.....

Account name:

Account no.:

Sort code:

Please make payments to the debit of my account:

Payee: Alliance for Workers' Liberty, account no. 20047674 at the Unity Trust Bank, 9 Brindley Place, Birmingham B1 2HB (08-60-01)

Amount: £ to be paid on the

day of (month) 20

(year) and thereafter monthly until this order is

cancelled by me in writing. This order cancels any

previous orders to the same payee.

Date

Signature

Lords of private health

More than one in four of the Conservative peers who voted for the Health and Social Care Bill have personal interests in insurance companies, private health-care, and private equity groups, and stand to profit from "marketisation" of the NHS. And not just Tories: Lord Carter, a Labour peer who is head of the new Competition and Cooperation Panel supposed to regulate the NHS, is an adviser to Warburg Pincus International Ltd, a private equity firm with significant investments in the healthcare industry, and was founder of Westminster Health Care, a leading private nursing home company.

● More: bit.ly/profitlinks.

Sites of struggle: orga

On 4 March 2012, the long-held suspicions of hundreds of trade-union activists in the construction industry were confirmed when it was revealed that the British state had been colluding with construction contractors to prevent union activists from getting work.

The "Consulting Association" (CA), a shadowy body funded by most major construction contractors, held data on numerous individuals which included information that could not have come from anywhere except police records.

The CA has also been revealed to be holding an "RMT file", suggesting that the extent of their data collection could be wider than the construction industry. RMT general secretary Bob Crow has publicly called for the CA's files on the RMT and other unions to be released.

The blacklisting revelations came in the wake of a huge defeat for the attempt by seven of the UK's biggest con-

tractors to unilaterally abolish the collective agreement for electrical and mechanical construction workers (the Joint Industry Board) and replace it with another (the Building Engineering Services National Agreement, BESNA) that would have represented a 35% pay cut for some workers. A sustained campaign of rank-and-file direct action, organised by a committee of activists elected at a mass meeting in summer 2011, was successful in forcing an initially cautious and even hostile union machinery into supporting the struggle and, finally, in forcing the contractors to back down.

What do these two experiences tell us about workers' organisation and struggle in the construction industry? *Solidarity* presents a symposium with construction industry activists, including blacklisted workers.

How the sparks won

By Skid Marx

The decision by eight of the biggest players in the construction sector to break away from the existing Joint Industry Board agreement and down-skill the industry by imposing the new Building Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA) seemed to catch the Unite leadership napping. Not so the rank and file.

Despite low union density on the ground — a common story throughout construction — enough Unite plumbers, heating engineers and electricians could see what this attack from the employers meant. And they weren't going to sit back and take it.

The response saw lively, aggressive demonstrations taking place, especially in London, targeting sites operated by the eight, and especially those operated by the high-profile industry-leader Balfour Beatty. This was occasionally backed up by unofficial industrial action. One of the eight, MJN Colston, caved within weeks of the direct-action campaign beginning, and the rank and file kept up the pressure on the seven.

Impressive though this was, it lacked any resourced national co-ordination and a strategic focus capable of forcing the remaining companies to back down. The campaign had an elected committee, but the leadership it was able to provide — relying on social networks (both real world and online) and occasional national meetings to coordinate and mobilise — was limited.

OFFICIAL

Eventually the Unite leadership got involved and the main focus became trying to make official the action that was taking place already.

But in an industry that is as transient and poorly organised as construction, the membership records would (perhaps inevitably) not be up to scratch and thus the first couple of attempts at legal action foundered on the rocks of the High Court. The leadership strategy seemed to be too little, too late, and too predictable.

In fact, the BESNA companies were perfectly able to second-guess and ride out a campaign of sporadic direct action and a seemingly doomed attempt to bring the dispute within legal bounds. There was a turncoat in the office of employers association Heating and Ventilating Contractors Association (HVCA), an ex-Unite national officer by the

name of Brian Boyd who had taken a handsome redundancy package and split to work for the bosses' organisation. He might not have been the sharpest tool in the box while working for Unite, but even "Brother" Boyd would know enough about the state of the union in the sector he had headed up to be of use to his new employers.

Once again, the picture being painted was of a well-prepared and well-resourced employer attack being met with a half-arsed and cobbled together response from a major national union. The difference in this case was that the rank and file were active and determined enough to fight and to push for a better response from their union leaders. Eventually, they would get it.

Unite's organising department put together a strategy for taking on the BESNA seven. Finally, research work was done to understand these companies — who their investors or shareholders were, what subsidiaries they owned, their key profit drivers, what big contracts they held and which lucrative new contracts they were bidding for, what overseas operations they had and what sponsorship tie-ins they promoted themselves through, and who the directors were, where they lived and so on. Now the union had a strategy — take the fight to the companies in arenas that would damage their reputations, place their clients' businesses at threat of disruption and threaten the revenue streams from new contracts, as well as damaging their brand reputations and making life difficult for the directors themselves.

ACTION

The rank-and-file activists were brought together to work through the plan and at their instigation a programme of nationally co-ordinated action was launched.

At the same time the union's legal department, under new leadership, took the fight to the courts and argued that Unite had done all that could reasonably be expected in its strike ballot procedures, and that any discrepancies could not be of crucial importance to the overall vote. Unite's legal arguments carried the day. So now we had a strategy, a campaign and a legal ballot for industrial action at Balfour Beatty. Within days, BESNA was dead.

The sort of campaign that was put together to take on BESNA is not a magic bullet. Unions can't simply roll out the same corporate leverage campaign against every employer attack or it will lose its edge and its focus and therefore lose its effectiveness. And the tactics and strategy of a campaign must fit the specifics of that campaign. What's more, we can not replace strong workplace organisation with this style of campaigning.

But what we can learn from BESNA is that an effective, resourced strategic campaign, and active and aggressive rank-and-file militancy can win out against even the biggest, best resourced, best planned and most determined employers in the country.

"BESNA win can be a game-changer"

By Dave Smith, blacklisted engineer

The big issue in the construction industry for the past 30 years has been false "self-employment".

The bosses have gone so far with casualisation that sometimes thousands of workers on a site are all considered to be "self-employed". It is complete nonsense, but it means we end up getting no sick pay, redundancy, or unfair dismissal rights, etc.

This is a decades-long problem of employment through agencies and sub-contracting. No-one would use the term "the lump" [a system of casualised, cash-in-hand hiring] any more, but it is the same issue.

It makes it very hard for unions to organise with a seemingly atomised workforce.

But we still do it; look at the recent sparks' dispute or the Joint Sites Committee's struggles in the 90s, or the late 90s Jubilee Line battles (which were started by agency workers).

The other perennial issue is safety. Profit always comes first, and the deregulation of labour results in the casualisation of everything else.

The blacklisting of union reps is also a huge issue, of course. It's very difficult for unions to operate if all their ac-

tivists can't get jobs. We all knew blacklisting was going on, it's just that with the new evidence we can finally prove it.

The victory against BESNA was not just a huge confidence boost, it's also brought new layers of activists into activity. Hopefully it can be a game-changer.

Construction unions need rank-and-file democracy

By a construction worker

Union organisation is generally poor. The construction unions have sold their soul to the devil by agreeing to appointed convenors.

On the major jobs, convenors are agreed between the unions and the main contractor before a single worker gets onto the site. The convenor is appointed by the union and paid by the contractor — there is no election amongst the workforce.

The appointed convenor often shares an office with the company employment relations managers and will carry out the site inductions on behalf of the firms.

You may get a half-decent one who will give some kind of individual representation, but you can forget any kind of proper union organisation, stewards' committees, or industrial action.

The unions have given up on ever being able to organise the agency staff and self-employed workers. It's difficult, but it's not impossible.

Instead they have cut a deal that gets them symbolic positions but no real organisation. It's almost as if the companies own the unions.

In the old days this would have been all done under the table and with an element of shame. Nowadays they shout about it. It is a disgrace.

nising in construction

Blacklist exposes limits of our “democracy”

By Darren O’Grady, blacklisted electrician

Organisation in the construction industry over the last period has been very poor, but there have been clear examples of how workers can win, such as the Jubilee Line (98-99), Pfizer’s (2000), recent JIB/BESNA dispute, etc. In every case the initiative has come from below.

The union leadership always have excuses why workers don’t organise, but most of them don’t hold water. Yes, the work is transitory, but in my experience that can encourage people to have a go. If you don’t have a permanent job and the temporary one you do have is crap, what have you got to lose by having a go?

Unite appear to be putting some resources into recruitment and organising on the back of the sparks’ dispute, but why wouldn’t they? The level of unionisation is so low that any union with an ounce of common sense could surely recruit hand over fist if they made the effort. The issues are certainly there, the ability to hurt the employer is clear to see, and an effective focused campaign could easily set an example that could be followed around the country. There is no inherent reason why construction workers are not organised here — look at high levels of unionisation in other countries. It is the failings of the leadership that are to blame in my opinion.

Balfour Beatty and the other BESNA contractors had gotten used to bullying workers and because of the resources that they have got. Like many employers elsewhere, they probably thought that the virtually unchallenged “need” for cuts meant that the workforce would roll over.

By no means is the war with construction bosses won, but beating BESNA is an important victory and could be a great

springboard to build from.

I was contacted by “World in Action” for a programme back in the 1980s and found out that there was a file on my union activities and political sympathies, which was from the Economic League and the Service Group within them. Very little of this information appears in my Consulting Association file. From my experience and from talking to others and seeing some files, it would appear that CA was a smaller scale operation and the “quality” of much of their information was pretty poor — newspaper clippings, hearsay etc.

Yet even then, Dave Smith’s case has shown the extent of collaboration between the state and the bosses [contractor Carillion admitted that two of its subsidiaries has “penalised” Smith for his union activity, and David Clancy, investigations manager at the Information Commissioner’s Office, has given testimony that the information on Smith and others “could only have been supplied by the police or security services”]. I suspect that it was even greater in the days of the Economic League, but perhaps the state has diverted some resources away from monitoring trade unionists as the movement became more compliant after the big defeats of the 80s.

It was no surprise to know that I was blacklisted. I am blacklisted because I wanted safe conditions on site and workers to earn a decent rate of pay — it is as simple as that. That is outrageous and should not happen in a democratic country, but the fact it is so commonplace should make clear the nature of “democracy” in Britain.

It is the sort of thing that the media and mainstream politicians denounce when it occurs in “despotic regimes”, but a practice that they are fully aware of and complicit in over here.

Taking on the blacklisters

By the Blacklist Support Group

The first legal battle since the revelations about police collusion in the illegal blacklisting of workers were exposed in the *Observer* (4 March) saw blacklisted electrician Tony Jones take on some of the largest companies in the UK construction industry at Manchester Employment Tribunal, 20-21 March.

The companies accused of blacklisting include Carillion and their recruitment agency SkyBlue (and one-time Carillion subsidiary Crown House Technologies), Balfour Beatty, Emcor (previously Drake & Scull), Phoenix and the employment agency Beaver Management.

The claim being heard by the Employment Tribunal is that the firms unlawfully refused to employ Tony Jones because of his previous trade union activities as part of Unite on the some of the most prestigious construction projects in the UK over the past decade, including Wembley Arena, Heathrow Terminal 5, Manchester University, Manchester Law Courts, Fiddlers Ferry Power Station.

Documentary evidence of the blacklisting first came to light after the Information Commissioner’s Office raided the premises of the notorious Consulting Association in 2009. They discovered a database containing the personal details of over 3,200 trade union members which was being shared

amongst the biggest building firms in the country as a means of stopping individuals gaining work.

Mr. Jones is being represented in court by his union.

Tony Jones said: “I have done nothing wrong. Nothing illegal. I am an electrician and a member of a trade union. Last time I looked that was not against the law. But time and again I have been refused work and my family has suffered because of this illegal blacklisting.

“I have got pages of documentary evidence that proves beyond any doubt what was going on [...] Are big businesses above the law?”

In an unusual coincidence, in the very same court, on the very same dates, another blacklisted electrician also took a claim, but this time under the new Blacklisting Regulations 2010.

Steve Acheson is taking a claim against Dimension Data for blacklisting him from the Holford Gas Terminal construction project in Cheshire under new blacklisting legislation. This will be one of the first cases ever taken under the new regulations which were introduced in the last days of the previous Labour government in response to the Consulting Association scandal.

The regulations were heavily criticised by unions, legal experts and campaigners when they were introduced as being too weak to effectively protect workers, so the Acheson case will be watched closely.

A new unionism for the construction industry

By Michael Dooley

The recent period has been one of decline and retreat from the point of view of trade union organisation within the industry.

The electricians are one of the last trades with anything like a high level of organisation. Overall union density is probably less than 10%. However, the level of support for trade union ethos — collective organisation and campaigning — is much higher. You will find non-union members, self-employed workers and agency staff expressing support for trade union ideas.

The construction industry has always been transient. However, in the past a job may have taken four years to complete, which gave unions time to build up organisation in a traditional way. Modern construction design allow similar projects to be completed in two years or less, so a lot of those old approaches to organising don’t work. New tactics need to be developed, such as campaigns which focus on organising workers in their communities as well as on sites.

Unions need to develop a profile in communities so that when a construction worker goes to a new site they’ll be familiar with the union from its work in their community, and may already be a member. It’s about coupling a community presence with an assertive industrial approach and using industrial muscle to support communities. Other methods include trade or group specific organising, geographical area specific or company-wide organising.

DISPUTES

A construction workers’ union run along those lines would run disputes on every site.

There’s an endless list of issues to organise around, from low pay to safety to bullying, which is rife in the industry. Because of the incredibly tight time-frames now common in the industry, the employers can’t afford any disruption, so even a small group of well-organised workers can have immense power.

Ultimately I think that campaign needs a level of direct action that official trade unions simply aren’t able to organise. Building sites are well-oiled machines running to very tight timetables. If those timetables fall behind, even slightly, trade contractors can put forward surcharges which can become very expensive for the big employers.

Most sites areas are restricted in size. They don’t store materials on site, so materials need to be brought onto site each day. Employers work on margins of one or two per cent and are under economic pressure to run jobs on or ahead of schedule. Even a minor disruption of, say, 20% of the materials going onto a site can have a huge impact in a very short time.

If you can stop a concrete lorry during a concrete pour, for example, you will shut that site down. We’ve had 300 people on the electricians’ demos; we need to get those 300 people to stand at the gates to a site and ask drivers not to cross their picket line. That’s the mechanics of it. You’d need an awful lot of police officers to continually deal with a flying picket of 300 workers in a urban area.

The tactics I’m talking about are ones that we’ve employed in the past but have been lost in the conservatism of the British labour movement. But these are the tactics that work.

Fundamentally that’s the only question — how can we win? We should adopt the tactics which are necessary to win the fight.

● Michael Dooley is a construction worker activist and was the left candidate for the leadership of construction union UCATT until bureaucratically excluded from the election. This article initially appeared in *Solidarity* 220, 12 October 2011

Coal miner's daughter fights the Empire

Molly Thomas reviews *The Hunger Games*, directed by Gary Ross

***The Hunger Games* looks like being the next huge teenage film franchise based on a book series to follow in the footsteps of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. There is also something in it for adults.**

The Hunger Games is set in an apocalyptic future where 12 districts are ruled over by the imperial Capitol following a crushed uprising. As punishment for the rebellion, each district is forced, each year, to offer two teenagers, chosen by lot, as tributes to fight to the death in the Hunger Games in front of an avid television audience in the Capitol.

"Hunger", because starving families in the districts can get themselves extra food by putting extra tickets for their children into the lottery.

The film series centres around Katniss Everdeen (rising star Jennifer Lawrence, best known for her role in *Winter's Bone*), a 16-year-old girl who volunteers as tribute to save her younger sister, Prim. The other tribute from District 12 is Peeta Mellark (played by Josh Hutcherson), with whom Katniss feigns a romantic relationship during the Hunger Games in order to help them survive.

The film is long (142 minutes) but does not drag. The adaptation devotes time to events in District 12, a coal-mining area, portraying it in a way that brings to mind the Great Depression. The scene where Katniss volunteers is a poignant and heart-shattering display of the inhuman power of the Capitol over the districts.

The film has a strong anti-imperialist message, which comes to a head late into the film. Following the death of one of the tributes, the people of District 11 rebel against the Capitol's troops. The rebellion is trampled but its political impact resonates.

Similarly, the pre-Hunger Games sequences in the Capitol, with their extravagance and opulence (depicted by Elizabeth Banks' Effie Trinket, Wes Bentley's Seneca Crane, and games commentators played by Stanley Tucci and Toby Jones), evoke the worst excesses of historic empires, in coun-

Katniss Everdeen, played by Jennifer Lawrence

terpoint to the poverty in District 12.

The author of the books on which this film and its sequels-to-come are based, Suzanne Collins, says that the idea came to her from flicking between reality television programmes and coverage of the US invasion of Iraq.

It is also possible to recognise elements of Ottoman history in the story. The "tributes" echo the story of the Janis-

saries, Christian boys taken from their families to be the private guard of the Sultan.

The idea of subject peoples being conscripted into fights to the death for the entertainment of the imperial elite is as old as Ancient Rome.

This is a more than usually rich story, and not just for teenagers.

Moments of working-class life

Martyn Hudson reviews *A Geek Tragedy* by David Rudd Mitchell (Flavourbus Press)

Tragedy, for David Rudd Mitchell in this first collection of poems, lies in that moment when the eponymous Geek steps over from childhood, specifically at the moment of his father's death.

The poems in this collection bear witness to a sense of humanness confronted by the blank indifference of nature and history to our hopes and frustrations. They document the stoical lives of working-class people in moments of transit or seeing.

Ultimately, the resolute humanism of Mitchell finds solace not in faith's resolution of life's meagre anxieties but in an atheism where death "sinks us", rather than a religion which "sets us adrift".

The documentation of ordinariness in this extraordinary poetic document reminds us, as John Berger once said, that artists run among us like legends and rumours displaying guts, honour, and irreducible hope.

There is much humour in the collection. Music, drinking, smoking are touchstones in the collection and in many ways are things nostalgically left behind as Mitchell confronts a world where one parent has disappeared from it.

Perhaps the most moving testament in the book is openly dedicated to his father, that in the grief and chaos after death "I like the idea that your peace is a night like this".

The poems deride grandeur and bold statements — they are snippets of moments and conversations overheard.

"She scrapes back her great unwashed hair/Grabs tightly her great unwashed pram/Then purposely and unstopp-

able as an advancing army/Strides forth to the cash point/To inherit the earth". That poem, "Meek Week", reprises the Sermon on the Mount on the everyday streets of urban Britain.

Others bring poetry into collision with drinking and mayhem: "In sweaty, after hour clubs/Office girls with smoke-

scented hair/Roared sonnets laced with shrieks/Whilst dancing round their Haiku".

In some ways this is the polar opposite of an English poetry enwrapped with the mysteries of landscape and history, the British isles of Heaney and Hughes.

There is no sustained gaze upon nature here, only an attempt to unravel the mysteries of identity and human engagement and love.

The only poet consistently referred to, by name and obliquely through the poetry, is Philip Larkin.

Mitchell is entirely without Larkin's cynicism, but the best of these poems have a similar air of insouciance or confusion, or the displacement of the nervous and the Geeks.

In many ways it is the search for an original voice, heard in the pubs and the shopping lanes, that is the best thing about this collection.

It has the style and the thoughtfulness of Simon Armitage and Roger McGough — very different poets but ones who share with Mitchell a sense of bringing something new to the language of verse, unsullied by the constant reprise of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

And like Larkin, what remains for Mitchell at the end of the day, is love: "He no longer wants you and that is final/Like a glistening coin, in the honeyed shade of the men's urinal/It's not you, Oh no, He loves you more than anyone/It's where you've been and what you've done".

Collections such as this, where stories of life's hardships and realities are expressed in an authoritative, yet hesitant and humble, poetic voice, help us overcome the witless adoration for the England of costume dramas and reversions to the poets of the past.

Will the far left learn from the Toulouse murders?

On 19 March, Mohammed Merah, a French citizen of Algerian descent and a self-described member of al Qaeda, killed three Jewish children and an adult at a Jewish school in Toulouse; the previous week he had shot dead three French soldiers of North African origin. At first the killer's identity was not known. On 22 March Merah was tracked down by French police and shot dead. Yves Coleman, of the journal *Ni patrie, ni frontières*, discusses and criticises the reaction of the left to Merah's killings.

Anti-semitism and anti-Judaism have a long history in France.

Pogroms happened around the first crusade of 1095; Jews were several times expelled from the French kingdom in the middle Ages (from 633 to 1394); for a time Jews were obliged by the Church to wear a "rouelle", a yellow patch which preceded the invention of the yellow star by the Nazis.

At the end of 19th century, after France's defeat by Prussia in 1870, Jews became a favourite target of the far right, of right-wing and anti-Republican Catholics, and also of part of the workers movement, specially when financial scandals occurred. At each important social crisis, between the two world wars, far-right groups which could organise hundred thousands of people (like the "Croix de Feu") targeted the Jews, for example, the Popular Front's Socialist Party Prime Minister Leon Blum.

During the Second World War, the Pétain government not only cooperated with the Nazis but its "legal" (racial and racist) definition of who could be considered as a Jew was stricter in France than in Germany, thanks to French lawyers and politicians! Jews were banned from most professions (lawyers, doctors, judges, teachers, journalists, State employees, actors, soldiers, cops, etc.) and lost their properties, from small shops and flats to shares and capitals invested in big companies. In the high schools and universities, Jews were not allowed to represent more than 3% of the students. The word "Jew" was mentioned on the identity cards.

DETAILED

As early as September 1940, the French government created a very detailed "Jewish file" which later helped the cops to arrest 80,000 Jews, 77,320 of whom were killed.

And the French government convinced the Nazis to deport 11,000 children when the fascists initially wanted to deport "only" the Jews who were older than 16 years old...

Today France has the largest Jewish population as well as the largest "Muslim" population in Europe. Obviously the fact that the Toulouse killer was a French Muslim will not help links between Jews and Muslims in France. A common demonstration was planned by the leaders of the two religious communities, but was cancelled when the murderer was identified and killed. Nevertheless, other common demonstrations happened or will happen in the suburbs of Paris and in other towns of France.

During this week, Jewish and Muslim religious authorities tried their best to explain that the Muslim religion was not an issue in these murders and to put the blame on Mohammed Merah's supposed "madness" and on his "crazy" interpretation of the Quran. They worked hand in hand with the police and Sarkozy government to prevent any religious or political manipulation of the Toulouse attack (the same government which, for years, has targeted Muslim women for wanting to wear a hijab at school and in public administration and for their customary ritual slaughter of animals — the French Prime Minister's comment about this "archaic custom" shocked the Jewish community leaders who have a similar way of slaughtering animals).

Nevertheless, as soon as the identity of the killer was known, Jewish radio stations started a violent campaign against Islam, confusing this religion with its most extremist political forms, like internationalist jihadism, while repeating "Let's not make any amalgam or confusion". It's true that Jewish radio stations (RCJ, Radio J, Radio Judaïques, Radio Shalom, etc.) in France are very rightwing and usually invite the most conservative members of the "community", but listening to their comments this week was rather worrying, even taking into account their understandable emotion. One can only hope these nasty comments do not reflect the general opinion of French Jews.

The reactions of the (reformist or radical) left-wing mili-

Banner on the Paris demonstration to remember Merah's victims

tants, as expressed on the internet, were no less worrying. None of these militants noticed that the Toulouse attack is the third attack since 30 years which killed Jews in France and which the Left hastily attributes to the Far Right. (And, very cleverly, Sarkozy and his government did the same: we are in the middle of an electoral campaign and any blow against Le Pen is useful from Sarkozy's point of view.)

The same attitude prevailed when four people were killed by a bomb put in front of the Copernic synagogue in Paris, on 3 October 1980 (it's a miracle that "only" four people were killed that Friday, which was also a Jewish religious feast); and when six people were killed and 22 wounded in Paris, on 9 August 1982. That time, a terrorist commando (attributed to a Palestinian group called Fatah-Revolutionary Leadership but also to German neo-Nazis who had been trained in Palestine) attacked Goldenberg's restaurant in the rue des Rosiers (an former Jewish district, and close to a synagogue). The third time, in Toulouse, on 19 March 2012, three Jewish children (seven, five, and four years old) and one adult were killed. One teenager was seriously wounded and is still in intensive care.

BLAME

The blame for the attack was instantly put on the far right — a sad example of that attitude can be illustrated by the article in *Solidarity* 239, which is rather surprising as the AWL is one of the rare far-left organisations in the world which has criticized left anti-semitism for years.

In this text, the author favoured the hypothesis of a far-right attack.

He recalls that the OAS (Secret Army Organisation) during the Algerian war tried to overthrow De Gaulle's regime and to impede Algeria's independence, by organising a military coup and mobilizing French settlers in Algeria. He mentions the influence of French fascists in the military forces; but ignores the fact that the pro-colonialist Far Right never killed the Vietnamese, Algerian or African soldiers who were fighting under its command inside the French military forces.

In their numerous books top-rank officers of French colonial armies always hail the courage and qualities of their African, Arab or Asian soldiers or lower-rank officers.

Actually it was the French Army which invented the use of colonial forces against liberation movements (a technique which was then copied by the Americans in Vietnam and elsewhere). They recruited among the colonised people and trained African, Arab and Asian soldiers to torture and kill

the independentist militants and guerillas.

A good part of the 66,000 "harkis" (harkis are Algerians who chose to cooperate, under different forms, with the French Army during the Algerian war and fled with their families to France after the independence to avoid being killed by the Algerian NLF) and of their descendants vote for the National Front today. In 1997, the "first and second generation harkis" (sic) represented 154,000 people: between 24 and 28% of them intend to vote for Marine Le Pen at the next presidential election, 26 % for Sarkozy and 26% for Hollande, the Socialist Party candidate. So Mohamed Merah's attack against Jewish children has nothing to do with the Far Right tradition in the French military forces.

And these murders have nothing to do with racism inside the French police, either. The above-quoted article mentions the killing of around 200 Algerians on 17 October 1961 by Parisian cops and points to the existence of fascist and Far Right traditions in the French police (the National Front tried to create a policemen's trade union but was finally banned). This is true. but today the French police recruits more and more people who have one or two Arab, Berber, or Black African parents.

RACISM

The racism of Gallo-French cops is directed much more against Arab or African ordinary citizens (legal or "illegal" foreign workers, African-French or Arab-French people) than against their Black or Arab colleagues inside the police forces (racism exists also inside the French police of course, but it's much more violent against "normal" citizens).

So those who believe in the virtues of a democratic Republic can blame Sarkozy and his government for not fighting against the racist attitudes of the cops towards the non-"Gallo-French" population. They can blame them for encouraging racist prejudices and discriminations against Roma, against Africans (accused of having several women, many children and living on social benefits, etc.), against North Africans (accused of practicing a "dangerous and archaic" religion). But they can't blame Sarkozy and his ministers for fueling anti-semitism in France. Such an argument is totally absurd as an explanation for Mohammed Merah's killings in the Jewish school in Toulouse!

As said before, this is not the first time that the French Left hastily puts the blame on the Far Right when Palestinians or so-called sympathisers of the Palestinian cause kill Jews in France.

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Once more, this week, many far left or anarchist militants (inside and outside France) were paralysed or blind, and this even before knowing the killer's identity. They did not dare to clearly condemn this attack as an anti-semitic attack.

Therefore it can be maybe useful, although it's a tedious task, to recall what were the arguments one could read on the internet before the identity of the killer was known and even after the cops discovered he was a French Muslim, influenced by a terrorist-nihilistic ideology such as Al-Qaeda's.

We have spotted at least eight main arguments which were supposed to explain why this attack was not anti-semitic:

1. Arabs and Jews are "Semites". This silly argument is used in all sorts of left-wing or radical left circles when these militants discuss about the Middle East, North Africa, or Islam. Maybe it's worth recalling this concept was used in the 19th-century to explore the proximities between several languages (Arab, Hebrew, Berber, Tchadian, Akkadian, Phoenician, Aramean and Ethiopian languages). All historians today reject the existence of a Semitic race or Semitic people. Only ignorant leftists or anarchists still believe in these oddities...

PSYCHIATRIST

2. The murderer was crazy and should have been treated by a psychiatrist.

This argument has been used by different tendencies of the left (from the Socialist Party to the Trotskyists), but also by many intellectuals, rabbis, imams and journalists. Exactly like in the case of Anders Behring Breivik's attack in Norway, the media tried to portray Mohamed Merah as a "lone wolf" and not as a bearer of a fascist ideology, in this case an extremist form of internationalist jihadism.

3. Mohamed Merah is the product of a barbaric capitalist society which does not respect human life. This argument was used on anarchist forums by militants who wanted to "raise" the debate (I would rather say drown it) to a very abstract and general level, supposedly in order to evade any "manipulation" by the State, media or political parties. It's interesting to note that some anarchists had a much saner reaction: as they were living in Toulouse and closer to the local population, they were more able to express their explicit and radical condemnation of anti-semitism and did not try to evade the question by putting the blame on an abstract "barbarism", which can be used to "explain" everything and anything.

4. Mohamed Merah was just an ignominious bloody criminal. This argument was also used in January 2006 when

Ilan Halimi was kidnapped, sequestered, tortured and finally killed by Youssouf Fofana and two dozens of his African, Arab, Portuguese and French friends living in the suburb of Bagneux. The media and the far left tried to play down or hide the antisemitic dimension of this murder, reducing it to a purely criminal act, despite the fact that Ilan Halimi (an ordinary employee in a mobile phone shop) was kidnapped because his kidnappers thought "Jews have money" and would therefore certainly pay a ransom to free a member of their community.

5. "Racism feeds terrorism. This tragedy is the bitter fruit of French domestic and foreign policy. Merah claimed that he committed the murders to avenge the deaths of Palestinian children, and against the ban on the headscarf in schools, as well as France's role in the occupation of Afghanistan" (*Socialist Worker*, newspaper of the British SWP, 24 March 2012). Although the French Jewish children killed by Mohamed Merah have no responsibility in the above quoted crimes or political decisions, these British Trotskyists sadly succeeded, with these two sentences, in giving a disgusting illustration of the incapacity of many far left and some anarchist groups to deal with anti-semitism today. And these "revolutionaries" don't even realise that the "logical link" they establish between the Jewish children of Toulouse and Palestine is exactly the same as the one made by the "Zionists" they relentlessly denounce. Israeli politicians declare that all Jewish children can be protected if they go and live in Israel, and the "anti-Zionists" (like the SWP) explain Jewish children can be held responsible for the acts of the Israeli state. What's the difference between these two positions?

"RADICAL"

Furthermore, when a "radical" group takes for granted the "political" explanations of a fascist murderer, one can become deeply worried about their critical sense and intelligence... It's difficult to go farther in the dehumanisation of Jewish victims and negation of anti-semitism.

6. This attack serves the interests of Israel, a criminal state which presents itself as a victim. Another variant: "It serves the interests of Sarkozy during his presidential campaign". Philippe Poutou's first reaction — he is the candidate of the New Anticapitalist Party and adopted a better position later — was: "Apparently the man is crazy but it's perhaps not a coincidence that it happens during the electoral campaign. There may be a political calculation behind it to create a diversion in front of the economic crisis". Yes, of course, cynical politicians can and do denounce anti-semitism for their own interests. But in no way their attitude should push us to stay silent or passive when Jews are killed in the name of

"Palestinian solidarity"!

7. Everywhere in the world children are killed in ethnic and religious wars, imperialist interventions, etc. Why should we make so much noise about Toulouse victims?

We have here another version of the "barbarism" argument. A way to evade the specifics of the Toulouse attack in order to talk about something else.

It's true that children are killed everywhere on this planet, in Palestine or in Chechnya, in Colombia and in Rwanda, and that these murders do not create such a huge emotion in France or on a world scale. It's obvious we should react much more about crimes committed in other countries. But it's also obvious our protest is most efficient where we live and work, and in this case the attack occurred in France.

Let's finally underline that Israelis (and therefore Jews) are presented as "child-killers" by many anti-Zionists since the death of Mohammed al-Dura, on 30 September 2000. This propaganda has fueled hate against all Jews, whether or not they live in Israel, whether or not they support the Israeli government. It has also fuelled the hate against Jewish children, wherever they live. A basic datum many left militants refuse to include in their reflections, ignoring one of the oldest anti-semitic myths in the Western world.

8. If you describe Mohamed Merah's attack on Toulouse Jewish school as anti-semitic, how do you characterise the other murders he committed against French soldiers?

This argument is supposed to corner those who criticize antisemitism and push them to support... the French army, and to support its crimes in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Nevertheless, one can oppose the intervention of French military forces abroad, or in France, without wishing to kill, one by one, all its members... One can criticise the functioning of the police forces inside capitalist society, without wishing that today cops stop arresting murderers.

Those who use this doubtful argument have themselves no answer to provide about what should be precisely done today, and no answer about what a future revolutionary society could do to repress murderers, child abusers, rapists, and violent class enemies or simply political counter-revolutionary opponents. Therefore this argument is just another technique to explain away the anti-semitic character of this attack.

This article starts with a question. I'm afraid the answer is no, given the weak capacities of self-criticism in far left circles.

● Note: On 19 and 20 March, before knowing anything about the killer's identity, I wrote an article (in French) which can be read online here: bit.ly/GAVs6J. The title was "The killings at the Ozah Hatorah school in Toulouse are an anti-semitic act — we should not quibble about it!"

Demonstrations after Toulouse

By Edward Maltby

The Toulouse killer who shot dead three Jewish children, a Jewish teacher and three soldiers of North African and Caribbean origin, was Mohammed Merah, a Toulouse mechanic, who was inspired by far-right Islamist ideas.

In a stand-off with the police which ended in his death, Merah claimed to be a supporter of Al-Qaeda and said that he was acting to avenge "Palestinian children".

Shortly after Merah's death, silent marches and rallies took place around France to commemorate his victims. In Toulouse, 6,000 people rallied to hear speeches, led by the Socialist Party mayor of Toulouse, the Jewish Scouts of France, the French Chief Rabbi Gilles Bernheim and the Imam of Drancy, Hassen Chalgoumi. In Paris, 20,000 joined a demonstration called by the Socialist Party, the mainstream anti-racist organisations MRAP and SOS Racisme (generally seen as linked to the PS), the French Union of Jewish Students and the French Scouting association. The march was headed by a banner reading "Republic united against racism, anti-Semitism and terrorism".

DEMAGOGICALLY

Sarkozy has demagogically proposed new legal restrictions to make it an offence to repeatedly visit radical Islamist websites, and to further restrict the travel of radical Muslim preachers into the country.

The French New Anticapitalist Party has released a statement warning against making any "amalgam" of ordinary Muslims with fundamentalists like Merah; and declaring against "national union".

Lutte Ouvrière, the other large Trotskyist organisation in France, has published a short piece describing Merah as a "madman" and a "psychopath", and asking "what is the difference" between this slaughter and the killing of innocents in Afghanistan by French soldiers. The LO Presidential candidate Natalie Arthaud described him as a psychopath who had chosen to drape his madness in the banner of Islamism.

Merah may have been a madman, as Norwegian far-right

killer Anders Breivik may have been insane, but in both cases their actions were also political.

The British SWP claims that Merah's actions were "the bitter fruits" of French official racism and western imperialism. This simplification paints Islamists as not having independent views, but simply being mirrors of the West.

At best, it is unhelpful — at worst, it slips into offensive, essentialising nonsense, like SWP poet Michael Rosen's awful comment on the bombers who struck in London in July 2005: "If... you bomb them/They will bomb you".

"Bomb them"? Who? The 7/7 bombers were British-born men of Pakistani and Jamaican descent — does Rosen not know or care about their separate identity, let alone their own specific ideas? Or about all the Iraqis and Afghans who do not become suicide bombers?

This view flattens out the complex picture of distinct ideologies and national groups into one blurred, generalised stereotype of Muslims.

Merah was an Islamist, a devotee of far-right religious ideas. He was recruited into far-right Islamist ideas by Islamist activists and texts. He received training and instruction from organised religious fascists. The ideology that he served has its own logic and its own agenda. It is not a mental illness, though some mentally-ill people may act it out more than others do, and it is not just a blind reaction to something that the USA, France, or Britain has done.

Islamist groups have own positive programme for a religious state, crushing democratic, women's, and labour rights. For some, the Islamic Republic in Iran provides a model, for others the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, for others the historical Caliphate of the 7th Century AD.

This political programme, its ideologists, its organisers, activists and armed fighters, must be defeated by the labour movement and the left. It must be fought against by our movement around the world, just as European-style fascism must be.

In last week's article on the killings, written before all the facts on the matter were out, I speculated that the killer might be a white fascist. That speculation proved wrong — as our comrade Yves Coleman from Ni Patrie Ni Frontières explains in his article.

Why war crimes went unchecked

Gemma Short and Nuwan Senanayake review Callum Macrae's film *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished*

This film is the follow-up to Channel 4's 2011 documentary cataloguing the final year of the civil war in Sri Lanka.

This latest documentary recaps the investigations and describes the world's response — or lack of it. Macrae interviewed David Miliband, then UK Foreign Secretary, and John Holmes, a British diplomat who was UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

The evidence, both from Tamils who suffered and members of the Sri Lankan army that were involved, is damning. The Sri Lankan army deliberately targeted civilian targets, and they used co-ordinates from humanitarian workers to do that.

The Tamil population was herded, under gun and shell fire, into a small area with restricted food, medical and other humanitarian supplies. The LTTE or Tamil Tigers were at this point mixed in with the Tamil civilian population, and undoubtedly used them as human shields.

Interviews with the diplomatic movers and shakers of the day depict a picture of a "diplomatic dance" in which the Rajapaksa government "ran rings around" foreign diplomats to prevent much investigation whilst they crushed the Tamils.

John Holmes described the context as the "War on Terror", suggesting that the big powers condoned what Sri Lanka's government was doing because it was dealing with a group officially labelled as a terrorist organisation.

We should never place faith in our own or other capitalist rulers to defend oppressed groups across the world.

The northern regions of Sri Lanka are still effectively under military rule, and large sections of the Tamil population have fled or disappeared or are held in camps.

Tories will use army to break oil strike

By Darren Bedford

Over 60% of oil tanker drivers working for seven major firms have voted to take strike action, in a national ballot organised by Unite.

Drivers at Turners (94% in favour on a turnout of 82%), Norbert Dentressangle (75%, 71%), Wincanton (68%, 72%), BP (60%, 86%), and Hoyer (60%, 80%) will all strike. DHL drivers voted to take action short of a strike, and drivers at

Suckling voted against any industrial action.

The ballot is part of an ongoing campaign by Unite on myriad issues within the oil haulage industry, including health and safety, casualisation and pensions. The campaign's key demand is for an industry-wide collective bargaining forum to ensure that all companies and contracts are held to union-negotiated minimum standards.

Unite has yet to name dates for strike action but

any strike will significantly affect petrol supply to the majority of UK forecourts. The British state is already gearing up to break the strike and has put the army on standby to carry out emergency fuel deliveries.

Unite assistant general secretary Diana Holland said:

"This is not about pay — this is about ensuring that high safety and training standards are maintained, so that our communities are safe. It is about a sim-

ple measure, the creation of an industry-wide bargaining forum. It is about bringing fairness and stability back to an essential national industry.

"No longer can it be acceptable that oil giants rake in profits, while shirking their responsibility for the stable supply of a national commodity. The measures we are proposing are reasonable, responsible and sensible. We urge them to act and listen."

Strikes are likely to begin in early April.

New sell-off threat for Royal Mail



By Aidan Lomas

Royal Mail could be sold off (entirely or in part) by 2013 if the government's latest scheme goes ahead.

In what the *Financial Times* calls the "most ambitious privatisation scheme since rail", the

coalition plans either to float Royal Mail on the stock market or seek an industry or private equity buyer.

In a move that could be seen as an early warning of privatisation, communications regulator Ofcom is expected to ease regulations on Royal Mail pricing, and potentially introduce increases of 50% on second-class stamps and limitless increases on first-class.

A more expensive service will be just one of the hugely negative effects of Royal Mail privatisation.

Unions and anti-cuts groups must fight to defend public ownership and to re-extend it to those parts of the postal service already subordinated to market logic.

Cops to demand right to strike?

By Clarke Benitez

The Police Federation will ballot its 135,000 members on whether to demand the right to take official industrial action.

The move comes in response to what the Federation call "an unprecedented attack on policing" by the government.

When cops took part in a similar ballot in 2008, 87% of those voting demanded full industrial rights for police.

A legal right for the police to form real unions (rather than the staff association they currently have) and take strike action would be a step forward of sorts. It would create a greater potential for breaking working-class people who take jobs

within the capitalist state's armed machinery from the interests of that state. In a higher pitch of class struggle, the refusal of the police or the army to mobilise against workers in struggle could be crucial to victory and a legal right to strike could make agitating for that easier.

But we cannot be straightforward cheerleaders for "workers' rights" for the police. They are not "workers in uniform". The current ballot is all about fighting police cuts; a police strike which demanded more cops on the street is not something socialists could support.

We should support the police's right to strike, but only because of the limited extra potential it would offer for direct action that threatens the state.

War of attrition in Southampton

By Stewart Ward

Local government unions at Southampton City Council have settled into a low-level war of attrition with council bosses after an impressive campaign of creative, rank-and-file-driven industrial action in 2011 failed to prevent the imposition of new contracts.

Members of Unite and Unison are still staging action short of a strike, which council bosses admit is costing them money. But, particularly since the focus shifted from the local battle onto the national pensions campaign (which now also

stands on the brink of total collapse and defeat), unions seem to be investing their hopes in unseating the Tory administration in May's local elections. Labour

have committed to protect jobs and services, and have recently promised to reverse new Tory attacks on union facility time at the council.

Unions should also de-

mand that Labour commits to repeal the Tory-imposed contracts and restores pay and conditions at least pre-2011 levels, increased to match the cost of living.

Unions nationally should learn from Southampton unions' organisational example by making regular mass members' and stewards' meetings the sovereign decision-making bodies.

Despite the downturn since 2011, this approach has allowed the Southampton unions to build and maintain a far higher level of rank-and-file engagement than is usual in many local government workplaces.

Tories set out railway cuts plan

By Tony Byrne, RMT (pc)

On 8 March, the Tories published "Reforming our Railways: Putting the Customer First", a "command paper" with recommendations based on Sir Roy McNulty's 2011 review and report into the railway industry.

It stated that the railway "remains unacceptably inefficient."

As rail industry analyst and commentator Christian Wolmar says: "Given that Britain has experimented with the most radical change in structure of the railways of any country in Europe [where costs have gone down], is it not the case that [structure] ... is the root of the problem?"

Attending a dinner for members of the Freight Transport Association in April 1993 Tory Prime Minister John Major (speaking at the start of British Rail privatisation) said "It is common sense that the private sector will run the railways more efficiently". In 2012 the Tory command paper states that the railway "remains unacceptably inefficient."

But after 19 years the railways are still "inefficient" and they now get five times more subsidy than British Rail! Compelling evidence, I'd say, that this privatisation has failed and sufficient reason to believe that any serious Government program for rail reform should pay close attention to the structure that The Railways Act 1993 foisted upon us.

If only. The command paper says that "the case for a further round of major structural change ... has not been made." This is quite true, but only because that case was never examined. Mc-

Nulty (the paper takes its lead from his report) didn't consider that scenario seeing his brief as "... essentially how to reduce the industry's costs and improve value for money ... without sweeping away most of the present structure." So the government has gone for short term savings at the expense of rail workers and users; think ticket office closures, redundancies, higher ticket prices and unstaffed stations, rather than taking a longer term view that would have inevitably revealed the high structural costs of maintaining the fragmented set up we have at the moment.

RENATIONALISING There was no mention of renationalising the railway to eradicate fragmentation.

In fact the government intends to go in the opposite direction through regionalisation of Network Rail. The closest that Transport Secretary Justine Greening came to admitting this problem was while introducing the paper she said "For reform to really be effective there needs to be closer collaboration between the infrastructure managers, in other words Network Rail, and those who provide passenger services, generally the Train Operating Companies."

Railworkers are clear that "Reforming our Railways" is a cuts plan for the industry which, like the wider cuts in society preserves, and improves the opportunity for the Tories' business friends to make money at the expense of the rest of society.

We reject the command paper and are determined that austerity on the railways won't be had at our or users' expense.

Deeside picket next in Bootle lock-out fight

4 of the 149 workers locked out of the Mayr Melnhof Packaging plant in Bootle, near Liverpool have been sacked following sham disciplinary procedures.

A further 48 have been issued with redundancy notices, in addition to the initial 49 redundancy against which workers were taking official action when they were first locked out over a month ago.

The Bootle workers are now organising a flying "community picket" to visit the company's plant in Deeside, Mobilising the solidarity of the Deeside workers could be crucial to the Bootle workers' dispute.

The picket will take place from 11:30am-2pm on Saturday 31 March at MMP, Fourth Avenue, Deeside, Industrial Park, Clwyd CH5 2NR.

Bring placards, banners and loudhailers.

Strike wave sweeps Italy

By Hugh Edwards

Since the news on 20 March that the leadership of Italy's largest union confederation, CGIL, had voted down acceptance of the proposed abolition by Mario Monti's government of the job-security provision in Article 18 of the Labour Code, a wave of spontaneous strikes, occupations, mass assemblies and road blocks has burst forth across the whole country.

From Genoa to Palermo, from the largest workplaces to the smallest, thousands have voted with their feet to demonstrate and underline the increasingly uncontrollable desperation, anger and frustration felt by the working class as the crisis bites deeper and deeper.

Striking alongside CGIL members were their fellow trade-unionists from CISL and UIL, whose scab leaders had backed Monti's proposed changes to Article 18.

Those changes explicitly offer the bosses the opportunity to sack any worker with impunity, under the pretext of economic necessity.

Even if it is later established that the sacking was illegitimate, the worker would still lose the right of re-entry to the workplace.

EVIDENCE

This move is demanded by the European Union authorities as concrete evidence of how serious the Italian bourgeoisie are about "putting their house in order".

It amounts to a wholesale dismantling of a provision which, while restricted to private-sector businesses of more than 15 employees (and 95% of Italian firms have less than 15!), has represented a precious practical limit to employer writ.

The jobs of around 300,000 more workers are on the line as one company after another faces closure, and there are many among the bosses only too ready to grasp the lifeline thrown to them by Monti!

The decision by Susanna Camusso and her fellow CGIL bureaucrats to oppose Monti on this is to be welcomed, all the more so after the debacle of the three-hour strike that was supposed to embody united "resistance" by the three union confederations to Monti's assault on the pension system in December!

Camusso announced an eight-hour strike, with a further eight hours of mass assemblies in the workplaces to debate further action. But only an idiot could think that the

CGIL bureaucracy had significantly change its spots. Up to 25 March, Camusso announced no dates for the action; then she declared it would take place at the end of May, and after the administrative elections across the regions and provinces!

Having precipitated the spontaneous actions by a declaration of militant posturing, she now intends to apply the brake to mass actions that could spiral beyond her control, opening a threat to both the government and the trade union barons.

The Monti government's primary base of political support is the Democratic Party, the political point of reference of the CGIL leadership and hitherto an avid supporter of "reform" of Article 18.

The CGIL leadership too has not rejected "reform" of Article 18 out of hand. Its present dilemma stems from the fact that its rank and file is acutely and radically conscious of what is at stake.

Camusso's rhetorical gesture will have been based on a hope that the government and the parties in parliament might find a way to smoothe over the cracks and allow the CGIL leaders once again to climb down, as they had done previously over pension reform.

After the magnificent response of the workers, first Democratic Party leader Bersani, and then the leaders of CISL and UIL, followed by the boss of the major employers' organisation, have declared themselves ready to find a compromise in parliament. They may yet do so.

The ball is in the court of the radical leaders of the metalworkers' union FIOM, the variety of "base" organisations, mainly made up of public sector workers, and the movements of the radical would-be Marxist left.

FIOM is part of the CGIL confederation. Its leaders voted against or abstained on the document passed by the leadership at the 20 March meeting prior to Camusso's declaration.

Its rank and file are in the van of the present mobilisations, fighting to spread the action which, if it is to grow, must widen the point of attack from Article 18 to the whole panoply of grievances that like open sores disfigure the lives of millions in this country.

A general strike, all-out and indefinite, and a call to bring the government down and force new elections, and a drive for a workers' government, must be the minimum requirement from the union leaders.

Even the Tory press has turned on the Prime Minister

Force Cameron out of office!

By Gerry Bates

On Monday afternoon, 26 March, David Cameron's office said that they could not say who had come to private dinners with Cameron, as prime minister, because the office kept lists only of guests at official dinners paid for by the Government.

Within half an hour they had been forced to "find" the list they evidently had of guests at "meals for donors... paid for by the Conservative Party".

Cameron is still saying that Tory Party co-treasurer Peter Cruddas was free-lancing when he told undercover journalists that he could get them Cameron's ear, and an invitation to dinner, for £250,000, but it is plain that there has been a whole system of dinners for donors.

Labour should not just complain, but demand that Cameron resign.

The Government is try-

ing to regain ground by re-opening talks on reform of political-party funding. The long-brewed Kelly report on the issue, published in November 2011, fell flat because no party accepted its conclusions, especially not if further state funding for political parties was ruled out, which even Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg admitted it was while social spending was being slashed.

PRIZE

Now the Tories will try again.

The prize they seek is abolition or restriction of the unions' right to fund a political party, i.e. of the main workable way that large numbers of working-class people, individually poor, can assemble enough cash to run a party able to compete with the big parties financed by the rich.

Ed Miliband has in the past said that he wants to do a deal with the Tories and Lib Dems on this. Perhaps he thinks this stance is

a way of being "clever", because a deal will prove impossible.

Labour should instead clearly defend unions' political rights. The Tories may be willing to accept a ceiling on donations from companies and wealthy individuals — relatively easy to circumvent, by way of dividing donations into smaller amounts channelled through family members and hangers-on — if they can stymie the unions.

Cameron's backstop defence is that the wealthy donors may have been able to buy dinner with him, but they could not "buy policy". Presumably this is true, up to a point. If an individual plutocrat could get Tory policy tilted their way just by paying £250,000 and getting to the dinner table, then the other plutocrats would complain.

Yet plutocrats — or at least, those plutocrats who don't get Cameron's ear already from knowing him at school or university, or

inviting him to come horse-riding — obviously feel that getting the Prime Minister's ear is worthwhile. That raises another issue significant for the labour movement.

The atrophy of party democracy means that in the Labour Party as among the Tories, a lot depends on who can weave their way through the troops of aides and advisers and security guards to get the ear of "The Leader".

That things work that way with Labour is more grievous than them working that way with the Tories, who have never been a democratic party and who, after all, exist to promote the interests of exactly the sort of people who can pay £250,000 for dinner.

The "cash for dinners" scandals highlights the need to fight to win a democratic regime in the Labour Party, one where policy is decided by democratic conferences and elected committees and not by "The Leader".

General strikes in Spain and Portugal

By Rhodri Evans

Spain's two main union confederations, UGT and CCOO, called a one-day general strike on 29 March over issues similar to those sparking the strike wave in Italy.

In a country with 23% unemployment, the new conservative government

wants to change the law to make it easier for employers to sack workers.

The executives of UGT and CCOO met jointly, for the first time in history, on 9 March, to decide to call the strike.

The government's proposals weaken collective bargaining by giving precedence to company-level agreements; allow

employers to unilaterally reduce wages or change working hours and labour terms; and provide for new employment contracts under workers can be hired and then sacked without ado for up to a year. They also cut jobless benefits and make layoffs easier.

In Portugal, workers staged a general strike on

22 March, against moves by Portugal's conservative government to make it easier bosses to sack workers.

The strike, called by the CGTP confederation, halted trains, shut ports and paralysed most public transport, but was weakened by lack of support from the other main confederation, UGT.