BUILD STRIKES AGAINST THE TORIES

- Public sector unions: strike on pensions now!
- Build labour movement-based, democratic anti-cuts groups
- Stop the job cuts
- For a working-class political alternative — unions should organise fight to reshape the Labour Party
- Defend union rights

See page 5
**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.
- Nationalization of the key means of production: labour movement in Egypt, which is being swept by strikes, occupations and workers’ protests. We have been involved in setting up the Egypt Workers’ Solidarity campaign to support this new movement. Please get in touch, get a speaker to your union branch or anti-cut campaigns and get involved.

[info@egyptworkers.solidarity.org](mailto:info@egyptworkers.solidarity.org)

*Gravy Train street?*

**NUS Women’s Campaign: left gains**

By Jade Baker, NUS Women’s Committee-elect (pc)

This year’s NUS Women’s Conference was a far cry from last year’s mundane and poorly attended Labour Students saturated affair.

Women on the left managed to pass many pieces of progressive policy such as Free Education.

I am a member of Workers’ Liberty, supporter of NCAFC and Vice President Education at the University of Westminster. I stood for National Women’s Officer against Labour Students and NUS Welsh Women’s Campaign stalwart Estelle Hart.

In a sign of the times, I received just under a third of the vote (with 32 votes to me, 60 to Estelle Hart, and 77 reopening nominations). Probably everyone at conference who wasn’t aligned to Labour Students in one way or another voted for me. I was later elected to the Women’s Committee.

Just under a third of the vote isn’t bad considering I’m a new face and haven’t been involved with the campaign during my time as a student activist. This is mainly because there’s not a lot to get involved with.

Apart from good work on violence against women, over the last decade the campaign has been an empty shell, a stronghold clique of Labour Students Women. The priority now must be to sustain the anti-cuts, pro-free education presence in the campaign by getting new women involved from the recent struggles against cuts and fees. Particularly those from further south who usually don’t have access to a student union and are neglected within NUS ranks, but have provided so much of the energy and working-class edge to the recent movement.

Imogen Robertson, a Hall comrade, also got elected onto women’s Black Student Committee, which is fantastic and will propel the left intervention.

Labour Students will not campaign on policy that isn’t in line with that of the main Labour Party. It will be up to leftists to make sure these pieces of policy are not cut.

- To support all strikes (particularly UCU in their upcoming struggle) and to oppose union alliances.
- To support Free Education.
- To support sex work unions, to support the English Collective of Prostitutes, not to support Demand Change!, the abolitionist anti-sex work campaign.
- To support No One is Illegal, to oppose Immigration, visa controls.

Things are looking positive for the future of the women’s campaign. And more new women we bring in, the better.

**Cut top bosses’ pay!**

By Joan Trevor

Will Hutton has published the Final Report of his Independent Review into Fair Pay in the Public Sector, along with his recommendations to the Government. David Cameron and George Osborne commissioned the review in June 2010. The Treasury website summarises Hutton’s recommendations:

- “Senior public servants” pay will be directly linked to their performance and will be explained transparently to the public.
- In return, public service leaders are entitled to expect improved public appreciation of the responsibilities of senior public service roles, and the ethos of public service that motivates them.

The top 1% of public officials earned an average of £120,300, with university vice-chancellors on an average of £200,000. The gap between top and bottom earners in the public sector is growing.

Anyone with a real “public service ethos” should be ashamed to take so much pay when so many really hard working public servants are paid so little! The labour movement’s answer to the absurdly high wages paid public service bosses should be: don’t pay them so much. And pay ordinary workers more.

That should be our answer as well to the absurdly high wages paid private sector bosses. All the attention paid to high public sector pay distracts from the fact that private sector remuneration is even more “transparency”, and pay differentials shockingly high.

Top FTSE 100 chief executives earned 47 times more than the average in 2000 and 88 times in 2010. In the public sector the ratio is far lower, more like 12 to one. (These figures on differentials are taken from an article by right-wing journalist Simon Jenkins!)

**Inflation error leads to pay cuts**

By Darren Bedford

Workers have suffered the equivalent of a pay cut of thousands of pounds due to statistical errors which miscomputed the rise in inflation.

The Bank of England admitted in February that the consumer prices index (CPI) should have been 0.3 percentage points higher than it was for every year between 1997 and 2009. The retail prices index (RPI) was even more seriously miscalculated: it should have risen by 0.6 percentage points.

The errors mean that if wages had risen in line with the actual rates of inflation, a worker earning £10,000 in 1997 should now be earning £13,000. Instead, the failure of wages to keep pace with actual inflation means that the same worker has lost roughly £7,000 in real terms in the 14 years since 1997. Inflation-linked pensions and some benefits would also have taken a hit. Pensioners are phrase that some small salary-earners would have been 4% higher if the calculations had been correct.

Various sources, including the Department for Work and Pensions, are reviewing errors to “methodological improvements” in how the CPI and RPI are calculated, but even senior figures in the City are admitting that small earners have been fooled.
**Yemen opposition gunned down**

By Dan Katz

In an effort to maintain his position as Yemen’s president, Ali Abdullah Saleh resorted to extreme violence on Friday when over 50 anti-government protesters were killed by snipers in the capital, Sanaa. Saleh, who is in power for 33 years, has been trying to maintain the balance of power among the Shi’ite minority and the opposition, which is made up of a coalition of tribes. The killings continued on Saturday, with at least 100 people killed and hundreds injured. The US and army may be on the verge of replac ing Saleh. The protest movement in the central state— in the south the demand is for separation, and in the north is an off-war with the government in Sanaa; al-Qaeda is also active. Saleh has ruled the desperately poor area for decades by firmly manipulating tribal groups, bribing and buying, and dispensing patronage. All that is now unravelling.

The political fall-out from the killings continues. On Sunday, President Saleh sacked his entire cabinet (typically, he had then to stay in place in a “caretaker capacity”), and declared a state of emergency.

The deputy speaker of parliament, the government of the central state of Aden, and a number of ambassadors have resigned in protest at the massacre.

Three senior military figures have also announced their resignations. This group is from President Saleh’s own Hashid tribe.

Egypt: new constitution goes against left

By Gerry Bates

The protest movement in Bahrain has revived recently, with thousands of activists blocking the King Faisal Highway which leads to Bahrain’s main financial district. Security forces attempted to dispense them using tear gas.

At least three people are reported to have been killed in the clashes, with the regime claiming that three militamen have also died.

Following King Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa’s declaration of a three-month state of emergency, Saudi troops were invited into the country to help quell what the regime declared as an “external plot”. Over 60 people are reported to have gone missing or been killed in recent unrest.

Security forces have opened fire on some demonstrations, but seemed more cautious when thousands of protesters attended the funeral of Raed al-Kernaz, a 23-year-old prisoner killed in Deraa. They we re accused of plotting to overthrow the government in the manner of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions.

Tunisia and Zimbabwe socialists

Defend Zimbabwe socialists

Forty-five socialists, trade unionists and students in Zimbabwe were arrested on 19 February and charged with treason for attending a meeting about the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia.

Tunisian revolutions. The constitutional amendments in the referendum end with the leaders of the opposition also being targeted, the constitution, which was amended in early 2007, was heavily skewed in favour of Mubarak and the National Democratic Party. The vote was for the acceptance or rejection of all of them, as a bloc.

Two pillars in Tunisia’s revolution

By Sonya Al Clubian

Louvama from the Ligue Gauche des Ouvriers (LGO), Left Workers’ League) spoke to Solidarity.

The Parti Communiste-Ouvrier de Tunisie (PCTO) has set up the Committee for the Safeguarding of the Revolution within which Ennahda [the Islamists] participate.

That exists to make liberal demands— the constant assembly, liberty of expression— but has no social or economic foundation. However Ennahda does not participate in the 14 January Front. The 14 January Front makes social demands, supports workers’ demands and demands for economic equality. This divides the progressives and the others.

We are pushing some members of the Front on the left extreme of these positions. We are counting on the regroupment of a new alliance, on a more clear and more radical basis. We cannot be partners with people who want to go only halfway.

Egypt is a danger. They cannot be trusted. Our choice is to make no alliance with them but to defend their right to freedom of expression. That has been possible since the 1980s. We want them to have the right of free expression but also want them to expose their politics.

This is a risk to the relationship between PCTO and Ennahda developing — but it will be PCTO who lose out if it does. Ennahda would gain.

The most important mass struggle currently is the mining industry of Casfa. Other sectors are also in struggle — textiles, administration etc. We are demanding the opening of the books in industry, so that when employers say they cannot pay increased wages, we can check. We want to counteract the idea among workers that our demands are putting the economy at risk and that we are a frontier of the illegitimate. The strike movements’ demands are around good management and increased salaries and for capitalists to hire people better.

The situation is showing workers the rightfulness of our revolutionary ideas and attitudes towards strikes.

I think we should break with the logic of extreme of these groups, work with the centre— which leadsto Bahrain’s main financial district. Security forces have attempted to dispense them using tear gas.

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Egyptians are in today to support the political revolution, refuse the constitution amendments and call for a new constitution which establishes new Egypt, freedom and equality.”

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Europe’s democracies are in conflict and forward looking, who members is made up of the capital has been organised by a coalition of nations, a coalition of the self-styled leftist parties. Much of the movement’s membership is made up of young people who—as in Tunisia and Egypt—are generally pro-democracy and anti-authoritarian, looking who want jobs and better lives.

Elsewhere in Yemen other movements are in conflict with the central state—in the south the demand is for separation, and in the north is an off-war with the government in Sanaa; al-Qaeda is also active. Saleh has ruled the desperately poor area for decades by firmly manipulating tribal groups, bribing and buying, and dispensing patronage. All that is now unravelling.

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REGULARS

Making time for Marx

In praise of health workers

According to the Sunday Mirror two city bankers working for the German Deutsche Bank in London laughed at a Stop the War protest but were demonstrating in support of the NHS (9 March). One banker waved a £10 note in front of protesters from their high rise secure building while demonstrators looked on. A couple of 10,000 or so had congregated outside the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel, and proceeded through the streets of London until they reached St Bart’s hospital. The bankers' disgusted act of mockery was met by chants and boos.

What gives these bankers the right to act in such a disgraceful way? The same bankers who have brought this country to its knees, whose selfishness and greed has left an immense deficit to pay. These bankers have brought pain and suffering to the working class and have left so many in financial turmoil. These same bankers who quite happily lay up million pound bonuses while the rest of us scrrimp and save trying to make ends meet.

Does thiscowardly act sound familiar? It sure does. The police carried out the same vile act — waving their pay packets at striking miners during the 1984-1985 strike. The banker who made the taunt is apparently on a basic salary of £50,000 plus bonuses of on average £54,000. He has since been suspended for taunting the crowds of pro-
testers, many of whom were medics and nurses themselves, chanting “save our NHS” and “no more cuts”.

I have so much respect and admiration for these NHS workers who work tirelessly every single day caring and serving society, and saving people’s lives. Every single one of us benefits from the services they provide.

Debbie French, south east London

Users must defend the NHS

The criticism by the British Medical Association (BMA) to the government’s plans for the NHS is worth publicising. The BMA understands better than most of what is wrong with the plans. But we shouldn’t be surprised either that they backed away from outright opposition.

Unions involved in the health service, particularly Uni-
sers and Unite, are woefully failing to fight healthcare pri-
vatisation and huge cuts. In these circumstances, it is tempting to get too over-excited about middle-class profes-
sionalism and the growth of the middle classes.

There was a debate at the BMA and those who wanted outright opposition lost. Also, at the end of the day, how-
ever, there is no avoiding the fact that the big unions, and not just the BMA, have got to organise opposition or see jobs shed and transferred to the private sector, and the privatisation of the NHS recognised on the model of US healthcare. The prob-
lem of deference also extends, I believe, to the fact that not enough thought has been given to the role of the NHS involved in health campaigns.

Defending healthcare cannot just be left to the professionals.

Vicki Morris, north west London

Libya demo deservedly small

The Stop the War Coalition protest outside Downing Street on 20 March, against Western military interven-
tion in Libya, was attended by 100 people. It was dom-
inated by Stalinalists, mainly the CPS, Socialist Action, the Greek Communist Party and the CPGB-MIL – the last of which was distributing a leaflet saying “Hands off Libyan Victory to Qaddafi”!

This was, at least, more cohesive than the SWP’soxy-
moronic line of “No to intervention in Libya! Victory to
the Arab revolutions!” A Counterfire activist carried a placard listing the anti-working class policies of the UK government, including plans to change the legal regime against people in prison who solve the problem of what socialists should say about Libya… Meanwhile Chris Nineham of Counterfire was lead-
ingshouting “Hands off Libya!”

Sometimes socialists need to swim against the stream of public, and even working-class, opinion. But this demon-
strated something small for good reason – that most left-wing people are not comfortable with protests which are de facto pro-Qaddafi (and despite some Quaddafi forces’ actions) are an attempt to justify the Western assault.

Interestingly, there were almost no Arab (or other Muslim) people present. Meanwhile Libyan and other Arab ac-
tivists, like many others, who support the Libyan embargo.

AWL members attended and distributed our leaflet “No illusions in West but ‘anti-intervention’ opposition is aban-
doned regime” We had some useful discussions with
people who attended because they are sympathetic to Stop the War, but are uncomfortable with the position on Libya.

Safia Jomali, south London

Dave Osler

Say what you want about life-threatening illness, but at least an extended spell of convalescence provides a chance to catch up on some serious reading. It is largely thanks to a summer spent in a sick bed that I got an uninterrupted shot at reading volume one of Marx’s Capital, cover to cover. It almost made a particularly vir-
ulent infection seem worthwhile.

I like to think that what I accomplished in those weeks was a real, if modest, achievement. Even though I subse-
quently petered out half way through volume two, I am re-
liably informed that I progressed further than the man who leads one of the larger Trot groups in this country.

The thing is, this was long ago. Not only does time in-
evitably erode the memory of the contents of books de-
scribed in the past, but British capitalism as it is now has been decisively transformed from British capitalism as it was then.

This year the realisation dawned on me that I badly needed to reread all 1,000 and something pages of the damn thing. Thankfully, the task was made considerably easier by the publication of David Harvey’s A Companion to Marx’s Capital, which provides a running commentary chapter by chapter, backed up by video lectures online.

Unfortunately, the idea that Capital is readily accessible to a savvy worker without university-level education, is some-
ting of a romantic myth. Marx was a bluffer with a PhD in philosophy, and while he wrote very well by the standards of mid-Victorian didactic literature, he did not dumb down for a proletarian audience.

Accordingly, Capital is laden with references from ancient Greek and Roman literature to the prevailing ideas of 18th-
century political economy. References that were current then are history now, of course. Even in the most recent transla-
tion, some of the sentences are undeniably too convoluted for modern tastes.

Vicki Morris, north west London

26 March is just a start

The TUC “March for the Alternative” is an attempt to put pressure on the Conservative led coalition Gov-
ernment to change the direction of their economic policy.

It is good that labour movement bodies as well as vol-
untary sector and community organisations are marching together. Realistically, though, the aim of defeating Gov-
ernment policies can only be achieved by a greater level of industrial resistance and much more focused political campaigns.

The Tory led Coalition Government is pursuing an i-
deo logical agenda — keeping lax arrangements for bank regu-
lation, cutting back workers’ rights (including recently stepping improvements in flexible working arrange-
ments), rolling back the welfare state — all continuations of the Thatcherite/Thatcherite socialism that gave us the credit crunch in the first place.

But trade union reaction is, so far, very limited. 26 March can only be the beginning, we need a more strate-
gic and political response.

Though trade unions in the public sector are looking at the possibility of coordinated industrial action on the major cutsbacks in public pension schemes, this is an issue that only affects public sector workers directly.

The ideology behind the Tory plans (supported by con-
stant media references to inefficient bureaucracy and priv-
atised and averaged public sector workers) is this — a dismantling of decent conditions of employment for pub-
lic sector workers as a precursor for the dismantling of the public sector itself. The challenge is for public sector trade unionists to argue against this ideological intent and win over the majority of working people to defend the public sector.

The massive attacks on working-class living standards through job losses, public and privatisation and benefit cuts, and the higher prices for necessities will only get worse over the coming year. Progressive trade union leaders need to lead the resistance to this attack on living standards too.

The involvement of a broad coalition of community groups and the voluntary sector will be important, but the commitment of trade unionists to fight cuts and job losses will be better if more self-professed Marxists and trade unionists were involved in the anaesthetic wears off, my plan is to recommend volume two. While I am not looking forward to being ripped open with a scalpel, I can’t wait for the chance to get stuck into the next installment.

Marla Exall

Like many socialists, my understanding of Marxist eco-
nomics has largely been based on the exegesis provided by commentators from Sweezy to Mandel and Harman. I could level criticisms at all three, but they deserve credit for di-
gest ing the material and offering it up as a commentary on modern developments.

I am grateful that the thrill of getting back to the source. What’s more, I was constantly surprised how well passages from the late 1960s describe contemporary global-
isation. I was also struck by the clear continuation with the ideas developed by the younger Marx in his early writings, suggesting that the stage heavily contrasted to ‘pure’ aca-
demic Marxism.

Sweatshops have switched from Burnley to Beijing, and they are nowadays turning out iPhones rather than tex-
tiles. But Marx’s dissection of being at the sharp end of the manufacturing process retains every bit of the bite it must have had when it was fresh off the press.

And unfortunately, the political health of the Marxist left would be better if more self-professed Marxists did not make the trouble to discover what Marx actually said.

Ahmadnejad would have rather fewer fans among British capitalists if his name thereby could reconcile a little more of what they should have picked up from Eight-
teenth Bretons.

As luck would have it, I am currently in need of minor surgery and I have an operation booked in for May, I have given it some thought because organised labour has eco-
nomic and political power which it can use through tar-
ged industrial action, but because (imperfect though it is) the labour movement represents working class democ-

We need to build a truly non sectarian campaign, for-
mally backed by several unions, to take things forward.

A conference called around this aim, and open to all would be a start. We need a broad-based but political coalition against the cuts, left unity amongst socialist groups, and a recognition that the cuts will hit certain groups within the working class harder — disabled peo-
ple, women, BME and LGBT communities. The demands of such a political coalition can form the focus of commu-
nity and trade union campaigns but a broad based labour movement represents working class democracy.

Now is the time to build a broad base, solidarity based political coalition against the cuts, led by the labour movement represents working class democracy.

We need a workers’ government and this can only be built through workers’ democracy.

26 March is just a start
We are facing the most generalised attack on the work- ing class for 20 years. The government is waging class war to impose its cuts. It is setting up a special unit to identify areas of likely working-class resistance. This is open preparation for strike-breaking.

Where the Tory and Lib-Dem enemies of the working class movement are fighting the class war, what are our union leaders doing? They are sleep walking towards the abyss! The labour movement response is hugely inadequate. The “March for the Alternative” on 26 March looks set, as we write this, to be very big. But it is not enough!

Without industrial direct action to stop their offensive in its tracks, hundreds of thousands of jobs will be lost, services devastated and millions of lives ruined.

Without a fight for a political alternative to the Tory-Lib Dem government we will not have an overall alternative to this government and its policies.

Without a labour movement capable of creating such a government, we will not be able to rally large sections of the working class, to pre-empt the cuts in living standards around our banner.

The NHS as it has existed since the Labour Government created it, in 1948, faces virtual abolition if the Tory’s plans go through! And that is not all. The trade unions have weakened and undermined, if the Government has its way. A wave of cuts in union facility time, and union de-recognition across the public sector, will put an end to them. The government will lose its advantage with new anti-union, anti-strike laws.

Britain will become a grimmer place, with workers even more under the heel of the rich and the ruling class.

And yet union leaders do little more than speak, vaguely, of big mobilisations to come (sometime). Maybe they are not willing to organise union members to fight back now. Now, when the Government can still be stopped in its tracks, if the labour movement uses its latent strength. What concretely, is the result of this?

• The union leaders undermine working class confidence;
• It blocks any ‘fightback on issues where it is impossible to fight an adequate fight workplace by workplace, where a national mobilisation is the necessary response to the Gov- ernment (pensions, sometimes jobs too).

All the unions have been slow in their response. The att- ack on public sector workers can be seen as almost a year ago and goes into effect in April. Yet the union leaders are still wait- ing to see if they can negotiate something with the govern- ment. The government that has declared war on them, and on the working class!

For it is an unavoidable war, forced on us by the Tories and Lib Dems. For the union leaders, like Serwotka, to talk of a fight but do nothing to organise it is a species of throw- ing in the towel.

The National Union of Teachers now plans to ballot on pensions after their conference at Easter. That is good. But other unions — even the civil service union PCS, with a supposedly “left” leadership and big talk from Mark Ser- worka — are, essentially, doing nothing to mount a fight on pensions.

In Unison there are many groups of workers who want to fight the cuts to jobs and services, but they are routinely being blocked. It is as if the union leaders don’t quite know that they now live in a world where the government has tar- geted working class living standards, and is out to gut the labour movement.

As if they can’t register the fact that this is the most anti- working class government since Thatcher’s government in the early 1980s.

Far from encouraging Labour councillors to defy cuts, Unison and Unite have put pressure on councillors who want to vote against cuts to vote for them!

Evenh national leadership of the RMT, the most left- wing union in Britain, recently called on its members’ fight against job cuts on London Underground.

One national union that has begun to fight is the college- lectors’ union UCU. They plan a national strike of work- ers across Higher and Further Education, on March 24. UCU is right to begin fighting now, by itself, rather than waiting for slower unions to catch up.

Can we win? Yes! There are plenty of small examples of cuts being stopped at a local level, by industrial action and political campaigning.

If the unions were willing to nurture, support and cham- pion every spark of resistance, we would begin to push back the Tories and prepare for a situation where mass, gener- alised action is possible.

But the struggles, big and little and on their different lev- els, need to be tied together politically. The fight against the government is a political fight. Without being able to offer a political alternative, we fight with one hand tied behind our backs. A revolutionary government, which serves the working class as the Tories and Lib Dems serve the ruling class.

The SHAPE OF OUR FIGHT

« Ed Miliband’s Labour Party is aligned with the unions against the Tory cuts. That is good. But it is nothing like enough either organisational or politically.»

• Ed Miliband’s Labour Party is aligned with the unions against the Tory cuts. That is good. But it is nothing like enough either organisational or politically.

• Demands that Labour councils refuse to implement the cuts, and instead join our fight against them.

• Demand that the Labour Party supports the resistance, drop their support for milder cuts and pledge themselves to reverse the cuts and repeal all anti-union laws when they come to office.

• Encourage and champion every spark of resistance, local, industry-wide or national. Every group of workers or union ready to fight should start fighting, trying to pull oth- ers in. And we must fight to win, not just beate-rattle in the hope of winning some token concessions. Fight every cut!

• Ditch, completely and finally, the notion of social part- nership, of a common interest between employers and workers. There never was, and there never will be. There is a class struggle — in industry, in politics, and on the level of ideas. There is no such thing as a national “we”. there is only “them and us”. There is class war. Face that fact, and fight for the victory of the working class in that class war.

• Resist attacks on the Health Service, pensions, housing provision, pay, and other broad social issues. The labour movement can win the active support of large sections of the population if it takes the lead in this fight.

• Broader demands will allow us to build strong links be- tween the unions and community campaigners and service- users. It will allow us to build support for a workers’ government.

• The consciousness of the movement will, if socialists do their job, grow as we take action.

• Build strong, democratic local anti-cuts committees.

• Everyone on the demo on 26 March should get involved in their local committee. The best anti-cuts-committees have mobilised hundreds on the streets, storming council meet- ings, etc. We need united, open committees in every area, instead of national anti-cuts groups controlled by different left organisations (Right to Work, Coalition of Resistance) trying to create local fronts they can control.

• Rebuild the unions! Build rank-and-file movements. Our unions are not in a good state to fight. We need to renew them from top to bottom, fighting for democracy, bringing the bureaucrats under control and rebuilding workplace and industrial organisation.

• The unions require a serious fight against the anti-trade union laws and for the right to organise and strike.

• Work to unite the serious left.

We are facing the most generalised attack on the working class for 20 years. The government is waging class war to impose its cuts. It is setting up a special unit to identify areas of likely working-class resistance. This is open preparation for strike-breaking.

Where the Tory and Lib-Dem enemies of the working class movement are fighting the class war, what are our union leaders doing? They are sleep walking towards the abyss! The labour movement response is hugely inadequate. The “March for the Alternative” on 26 March looks set, as we write this, to be very big. But it is not enough!

Without industrial direct action to stop their offensive in its tracks, hundreds of thousands of jobs will be lost, services devastated and millions of lives ruined.

Without a fight for a political alternative to the Tory-Lib Dem government we will not have an overall alternative to this government and its policies.

Without a labour movement capable of creating such a government, we will not be able to rally large sections of the working class, to pre-empt the cuts in living standards around our banner.

The NHS as it has existed since the Labour Government created it, in 1948, faces virtual abolition if the Tory’s plans go through! And that is not all. The trade unions have weakened and undermined, if the Government has its way. A wave of cuts in union facility time, and union de-recognition across the public sector, will put an end to them. The government will lose its advantage with new anti-union, anti-strike laws.

Britain will become a grimmer place, with workers even more under the heel of the rich and the ruling class.

And yet union leaders do little more than speak, vaguely, of big mobilisations to come (sometime). Maybe they are not willing to organise union members to fight back now. Now, when the Government can still be stopped in its tracks, if the labour movement uses its latent strength. What concretely, is the result of this?

• The union leaders undermine working class confidence;
• It blocks any ‘fightback on issues where it is impossible to fight an adequate fight workplace by workplace, where a national mobilisation is the necessary response to the Gov- ernment (pensions, sometimes jobs too).

All the unions have been slow in their response. The att- ack on public sector workers can be seen as almost a year ago and goes into effect in April. Yet the union leaders are still wait- ing to see if they can negotiate something with the govern- ment. The government that has declared war on them, and on the working class!

For it is an unavoidable war, forced on us by the Tories and Lib Dems. For the union leaders, like Serwotka, to talk of a fight but do nothing to organise it is a species of throw- ing in the towel.

The National Union of Teachers now plans to ballot on pensions after their conference at Easter. That is good. But other unions — even the civil service union PCS, with a
Earthquake, tsunami... and meltdown?

Two views on the issues raised by the damage to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant

Get nuclear power’s risks in perspective

By Les Hearn

The terrible events recently in Japan have resulted in at least 15,000 deaths, of which those attributable to the overheating cores and hydrogen explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant amount to... zero.

However, the situation at the power plant is potentially more serious if it is not controlled. What has been happening?

Some time ago, the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) decided to build nuclear power plants in an earthquake zone. They judged that their design was robust enough to withstand a powerful earthquake. They judged that safety measures were adequate in the case of interruption of the electricity supply to the coolant pumps. They hadn’t considered the possibility of a large tsunami.

The plants are Boiling Water Reactors (BWRs) — sort of giant nuclear kettles. The core contains fuel rods of uranium-235 (235U) and plutonium-239 (239Pu) which undergo fission (atom-splitting) reactions, releasing neutrons, radiation, heat and fission products. The neutrons are fed back into the fuel rods in carefully controlled amounts to sustain a chain reaction, releasing heat which is continuously removed by superheated water under 70 atmospheres pressure. This is allowed to boil, high pressure steam being used to drive electricity generators.

The radiation is absorbed by the core and cannot escape. It eventually contributes to the heat of the core.

The fission products are smaller atoms, usually radioactive. Most dangerous are caesium-137 (137Cs) and iodine-131 (131I). They are contained within the fuel rods, paradoxically making these more radioactive for a while than the original U or Pu.

So what are the safety features of the Japanese BWRs? If the electricity to the pumps cuts out, the chain reaction must be stopped to prevent the release of more heat. This is done by inserting boron control rods into the core. These absorb neutrons so that new fissions cannot occur. Then residual heat must be removed from the rods. The fact that the coolant water is at about 300ºC shows that the core heat is considerable. If current is cut to the electric pumps, back-up diesel pumps come into operation. If these fail, batteries operate the pumps electrically. Before these run out, TEPCO assumes the main or diesel pumps will be working again.

What actually happened on 11 March and after was as follows. The buildings withstood one of the most powerful earthquakes in recorded history and the control rods were automatically inserted into the core. However, the electrically powered pumps were disabled when the earthquake jolted power lines. Diesel pumps kicked in but were then swamped by an unexpectedly large tsunami. Then the shedload of batteries took over for a few hours but, when they ran down, neither had the electricity been restored nor the diesel pumps restarted. The core started to overheat.

This risked damage to the fuel rods, resulting in emission of caesium-137 and iodine-131. The risk of damage was increased as the heat of the core made it difficult to cool it with the seawater that the plant workers and emergency services were trying to dump on the reactors. The water was instantly boiling and being driven off as steam. The danger of the fuel rods melting and emitting even more radioactive substances was growing. It is not clear that this would lead to a more catastrophic breach of the steel containment: this would require temperatures exceeding 1500 ºC. But it would increase the danger to the workers of excessive radiation, and risk spreading radioactive caesium and iodine in the surroundings.

The problem of these substances is two-fold. Caesium compounds are very soluble and chemically similar to compounds of sodium and potassium. Caesium rapidly spreads through the environment and is absorbed by plants and animals which may be part of the human diet. Its half-life is about 30 years, meaning that it takes about 100 years to decay to 1% of its original level. However, except locally, it is unlikely to be particularly hazardous. Iodine is more problematic. It is absorbed easily and passed on to humans in food. The body then concentrates it in the thyroid gland, converting a very general dose of radiation to a much higher specific dose to one tissue. It has a half-life of eight days, meaning that radioactive atomic for atom against caesium-137 but dropping to less than 1% in two months. Preventative measures can easily be taken, minimising the risks.

It is not clear whether the reactors will be brought under control without substantial emission of radiation. It is clear that TEPCO should have sited the back-up pumps higher up dieselpump stations. If these fail, batteries should be used to drive electricity generators.

The earthquake and tsunami has caused at least 15,000 deaths to avoid inundation by tsunamis. It is less clear but arguable that an earthquake zone was not a wise choice.

Nevertheless, the minimal injuries and absence of deaths compared with the effect of the earthquake and tsunami should help to put nuclear power’s risks in perspective. And we’re not talking about another Chernobyl.

Update on Chernobyl

According to the UNSCEAR report 20 years after the Chernobyl accident*, 134 people got acute radiation syndrome. Of these, 28 died soon after the accident, and 19 subsequently, mostly from illnesses that are unconnected to their exposure.

More than 6,000 cases of thyroid cancer have occurred among people, predominantly children, exposed to radioactive iodine (131I). Not all but the vast majority of these are thought due to this exposure. This resulted from contamination of milk but was not an inevitable result of the Chernobyl accident. As the UNSCEAR report notes dryly, “prompt countermeasures were lacking [which] resulted in large doses to the thyroids of members of the general public.

Iodine is needed to synthesise the hormone thyroxine, which controls metabolism in adults and, crucially, growth in children. It is efficiently extracted from food and concentrated in the thyroid gland. Grazing cows would have eaten grass on which radioactive iodine had fallen and incorporated it into their milk which, of course, would have been drunk fresh largely by... children.

The countermeasures are simple: flood the system with iodine tablets. Ordinary iodine (127I, since you ask) by giving people tablets containing iodine salts. This was not done by the incompetent bureaucrats of the former Soviet Union and the result was that low whole body doses of 131I were converted into high doses in the thyroid.

The good (or, rather, less bad) news is that thyroid cancer responds well to treatment and only 15 of the 6000+ cases have died. There is also little evidence of more than a slight increase in other cancers. Thus the total of deaths proven to be caused by the worst accident in the history of nuclear power is not many more than 43.

There should be a fight for renewables

By Dave Elliot

Japan is prone to major earthquakes, and buildings and other structures are designed accordingly. As was well demonstrated with this massive magnitude 9 quake, they had done very well in this regard, with few major building collapses. Otherwise the death and injury toll, bad enough as it was, would have been far worse.

However, the tsunami added an extra dimension for structures on the coast, which is where most of Japan’s nuclear plants are located. The plants at Fukushima clearly didn’t fare so well — precipitating the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.

There were warnings about nuclear safety issues prior to these events. The major seven reactor Kashiwazaki-Kariwa complex in central Japan was hit by a Richter scale 6.8 earthquake in July 2007, which fortunately only led to a relatively small radioactive leak into the sea.

However, these events reveal more than just technological failures. The problems in the nuclear sector also reflect major institutional and political fault lines.

In 2003 Tokyo Electric Power was forced to close all 17 of its reactors after it admitted it had tried to conceal reports of cracks for 15 years. After the 2007 episode, all seven plants were closed and a review of others plants around the country was initiated.

Most of Japan’s 55 reactors are only designed to withstand quakes of 6.5 — and, of course, it’s not a linear scale, every unit increase in the Richter scale is 10 times more in energy effect terms. An earlier proposal to raise the standard above magnitude 7.1 was shelved because of the high costs.

Japan’s Citizen’s Nuclear Information Center commented “Japan is simply too quake bound to operate nuclear plants,” but little changed, with the result that we have now had a major nuclear disaster.

Hundreds of workers have been exposed to high levels of radiation, tens of thousands of residents have been evacuated and terrified by fear of contamination. The situation is still ongoing (with the waste pools now a major focus of worry), but, unless things go from bad to even worse, the final death and injury toll may end up being small compared to that from the quake itself.

However, the tragic events are likely to lead to changes in energy policies in Japan and elsewhere. If Japan can’t run nuclear plants safely, who can?

Germany immediately closed down eight older nuclear plants.

China halted its nuclear programme for a review (it currently gets 2% of its electricity from nuclear and was planning to expand that to 4% by 2020), and reviews were set up in most other countries.

In Japan we can expect a period of blaming and shaming, and, hopefully, a new approach. A 2008 US Embassy Cable recently released by Wikileaks reported outspoken criticisms of the existing approach from Lower House Diet Member Taro Kono, with the Japanese bureaucracy and power companies seen as “continuing an outdated nuclear energy strategy, suppressing development of alternative energy, and keeping information from Diet members and the public”.

Kono claimed that the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) was committed to advocating nuclear energy development, despite its problems, and although METI claimed to support alternative energy, in actuality it provided little. He claimed that METI in the past had “orchestrated the defeat of legislation that supported alternative energy development, and instead secured the passage of the Renewables Portfolio Standard (RPS) act,” which simply required power companies to purchase a very small amount of their electricity from alternative sources. He also said that “the subsidies were of such short duration that the projects have difficulty finding investors because of the risk and uncertainty involved”.

He provided a specific example of how renewables were sidelined, noting that “there was abundant wind power available in Hokkaido that went undeveloped because the electricity company claimed it did not have sufficient grid capacity”. But in fact there is “an unused connection between the Hokkaido grid and the Honshu grid that the companies keep in reserve for unspecified emergencies”.

How much energy could Japan get from wind and the other renewables?

Although renewables have been downgraded over the years, Japan is still one of the leaders in solar PV production and it has large offshore wind, wave and tidal stream potentials, plus many other renewable energy options. A study for Greenpeace in 2003 suggested that, if energy efficiency was properly addressed, Japan could make a full transition to clean, renewable energy “without any sacrifice in living standards or industrial capacity”.

Since 2005, renewables-energy technology has developed rapidly with several scenarios now suggesting that renew- able energy, backed up by energy efficiency, could supply nearly 100% of global energy, not just electricity, by 2050, if there was proper support.

Japan represents one of the hardest places to make such a transition, since it currently imports nearly all its energy (oil, gas, coal), but the disaster at Fukushima may mean that at last support will be provided for a major change in direction, towards a climate-friendly non-nuclear future.

However, as elsewhere, that won’t be automatic: it will have to be fought for, against those with vested interests in the current approach.

- Dave Elliot is the editor of Nuclear or not? Does nuclear power have a place in a sustainable energy future? (Palgrave, 2007)

Japan union solidarity

- The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) has a page with extensive information on the earthquake, tsunami and what followed. You can send messages of solidarity from their website.

- Public Services International (PSI) has also issued a statement and has set up an aid fund to which unions can donate.

- The Icem, which represents chemical, energy and mine workers — whose members are currently involved in the efforts to prevent catastrophes at the nuclear power stations — has a web page with details on how to pass on donations directly to the Japanese unions, who have set up a special bank account for this purpose.

- The International Metalworkers Federation also has detailed information on how your union can donate money directly to the Japanese unions and has issued a statement.

- Education International has set up a Japan earthquake and tsunami fund to which unions can contribute.

- The IU F (global union for the food and hotel sector) has sent a circular to all its affiliates which includes an email address in Japan to which solidarity messages may be sent — iuf-jcc@iuf.org.

- If your union is affiliated to one of the global union federations listed above (and it probably is), please check out what they are doing and how your union can be involved.

From Labour Start: www.labourstart.org
The Reunion brought together people from both sides of the "Brixton riots" of April 1981. And, as the programme book very clearly showed, there were just two sides in this event. It was cops versus the black and white — but more than that, youth. The people who had been systematically bullied, discriminated against and physically injured by police over many years, were taking a spontaneous, messy, but perfectly logical and well-understood stand.

The running street battles of Saturday 11 April 1981 followed in 1981 by two days and night of massive police presence on the streets: stopping and searching hundreds of young black men "on suspicion" of being about to carry out a crime. At one point an injured man was taken away by police in a police vehicle and rumours spread.

There had been six days of such police harrassment — a planned attack on Brixton's youth — Operation Swamp! — justified as an attempt to cut street crime.

Getting participants and witnesses to recall what they were doing on that day and night resulted in a much more vivid and interesting retelling of the story than a standard documentary. Not least because each participant was forced to account for themselves, and betray their own weaknesses in the process.

The left-wing journalist Darcus Howe admitted that he played no active part in the street battles. By this point, he said, he was regarded as a thug — "it was up to the youngsters to fight this kind of battle.

Howe's wishful denials was embarrassing. The general excuse-mongering of Brian Paddick (the former top cop, now an unpleasant man — also tried to put Knight right. Knight whilst I was in the police I became one."

Ted Knight (then leader of Lambeth council) used the opportunity to blow his own political trumpet. This is the same Ted Knight who failed to organise a decisive confrontation with the Tory government against cuts in Lambeth.

Bleksley — who came over as a "refomed" aggressively unpleasant man — also tried to put Knight right. Knight claimed that the police had a planned in advance response to the events of Brixton on Saturday night — the explosion was expected. Bleksley said this was a rubbish conspiracy theory. In fact, the police arrived at Brixton spontaneously. Because no police officer off duty would have missed the chance to have a gigantic Saturday night out.

That night the police lost because the youth knew the streets, the people knew the police. It was a clear loss. In the long run, effective policing requires consent.

Today, Brixton is full of trendy bars and shops; it is gentrified somewhat. But police racism still exists — under the surface. Their noses are stuck to the surface. "Stop and search" is still used by police — indeed has been extended. Deep social inequality, the background to the "riots" will now get worse.

Stopping Qaddafi is what matters right now. An individual, a group, to and become wonen eaten. While it is still alive. (Leon Trotsky)

The would-be left is yet again trying itself in knots over a political dilemma: the belief that in order not to give general support to the British military intervention in Libya, they must strictly oppose it on this and on every specific thing they do or at least on every military action. In that it is a dilemma of their own making.

Of course, socialists should not give positive political support to the governments and the ruling capitalists of Britain, France, the USA, or the UN, in Libya or anywhere else. Even when they seem to be doing things likely to or may produce desirable results, they act for their own reasons, not ours.

Of course, their "humanitarian" concern to prevent Qaddafi murdering the Libyan rebels is not unconnected with their concern for Libyan oil. Of course they are hypocrites. Of course they operate double standards. Of course, we should not give them political credence or endorsement for anything they do. Of course we cannot thrust them to do what they say they are doing and only that.

Of course the no-fly zone on Qaddafi might in certain conditions develop into invasion and occupation. Wars escalate, combatants respond to situations they did not foresee. Of course logic unfolds according to its own needs and the interests of the big powers.

In 1882 the Gladstone Liberal government occupied Egypt "temporarily", and then Britain remained there until 1952. To give them support would be to repeat the experience in relation to Iraq of those who ardently backed the Americans in Iraq. In other words it would be stupid and . for revolutionaries, self-destructing.

Nevertheless, we have to look at a situation as it is. The UN, with Britain and France as its instruments, has set very limited objectives in Libya. There is no reason at all to think that the "Great Powers" want to occupy Libya or are doing other than a limited international police operation on what they see as Libya's "southern border". The bitter lessons of their bungling in Iraq are still very fresh to them.

What they are doing now has prevented, for now at least, the immediate fullscale massacre that Colonel Qaddafi threatened to inflict on his opponents, to whom he vowed "no mercy". In the name of what, then, should we oppose what they so far are doing in Libya? In the name of what alternative should we have told them to stop using air power to prevent Qaddafi massacring an incalculable number of his own people?

That is the decisive question in all such situations. Why? We tell them to stop preventing Qaddafi killing his own people, because we think it is alright if he kills his own people? Because we are pacifists pure and simple and oppose military action of any sort in any conditions? Because we positively want Qaddafi to re-establish control in all of Libya? Because actions that might in themselves appear good are not really "good" if they are carried out by those we rightly distrust and want to overthrow?

Because it is a principle in all circumstances to defend the self-determination of any state against intervention by outside stronger states? Because we have slogans like "troops out" (of wherever) that are outside of history and circumstances; which we worship as a fetish?

Obviously, this is to reduce the whole question to absurdity. Or, rather, it is to bring out the logic of the would be left's belief that they have got to oppose France and Britain, whatever the consequences.

From any humanitarian, socialist or even decent liberal point of view we have no choice but to back the British government's military personnel and mercenaries, should not be allowed to slaughter the comparatively unarmed and untrained rebels they have in their sights.

It is not necessary to believe that Britain and France are certain to do good. But it is possible to separate certain actions of such powers. Some things they do are, from our point of view, desirable and should not be "opposed". Take an historical example. Britain abolished the slave trade in 1808. Britain did not abolish slavery in such colonies as Jamaica for 30 years more.

Today, Britain is in the hands of the corporate oligarchy that opposed the American democratic republic of that time, had opposed and fought the French revolution, and was at war with post-revolutionary France. The motive of the ruling class was by no means pure and simple. Yet Britain did make war on the slave trade at sea. It stopped ships in which large numbers of human cargo were packed like sardines; ships whose masters in bad weather or when the need for speed became predominant routinely threw large numbers of living slaves overboard. That was good work, whatever the motives of Britain. Recognising that it was good work does not commit anybody to retrospectively backing Britain against Napoleonic France or against the USA with which it again went to war in 1812.

The arguments deployed by the left groups whose startpoint is that they have to oppose Britain and France whatever they do, show the foolishness of such a posture.

On the Socialist Worker website, for example, their relevant article contains a labour list of possible bad consequences — may be occupation, etc — to justify opposing not occupation, which, if it were to come, socialists would surely oppose, but this limited police action to stop massacre. The article lists the ruling class's hypocrisy, double standards, etc. It even lets itself deploy the idiot argument that to bomb Qaddafi's strongholds "would kill innocent civilians". That is an argument for opposing action aimed at stopping very large scale massacres is an example of the politica self-killing of people who are under attack. At the end of the day, their posture comes down to opposition to whatever the main imperialist bourgeoisies are doing. Much that they do, most of what they do, should indeed be opposed. But to equate our long term, rooted, class opposition to these powers with deep opposition to every specific thing they do is not to be independent of them, but to be their slavish mirror image.

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Memories of despotism

By Martyn Hudson

My experience of Libya from the 1970s to the 1990s defined what would become my third-camp politics.

My parents were migrant workers in Libya — working in the central oilfields region around Brega, part of a community of mainly Filipino, Sudanese, Palestinian and American workers. The site where both my migrant and Libyan workers lived was the site of an old Italian concentration camp and there were many monuments to the old Italian occupation which was remembered with anger by many Libyans — so much so that many of the Italian migrant workers were mistreated by Libyan managers. Having visited the memorial to the Libyan resistance fighter Omar Mukhtar on his execution ground near Benghazi I could sympathise with those who resisted and those who remembered that terrible occupation under Mussolini’s fascists.

As anybody knows who has either lived under or read novels about totalitarian regimes, they are cradles of tragedy and fear. Unwilling to contumely that Libya could have been occupied twice by Italian forces Qaddafi at one point issued a decree that the magnificent Roman cities at Sabratha and Leptis Magna were actually Arabic! Despotism could win that point by allowing to other opinion — hence the terrain of real history.

Also farcical is the cult of the leader, particularly when po-faced Stalinised personality cults are put in place by tyrants who are wilful in their abject stupidity: Qaddafi’s green book was a classic example of stupidity manifesting itself as a system. It is reminiscent of Stalin’s Foundations of Leninism mixed with an Arab Nights conception of Islam. Slogans from it adorned our town and of course its authority was unquestionable.

More tragic was the routine execution of students, and the boiling in oil of students in the squares of Tripoli and Benghazi — undoubtedly at the hands of the security forces. Executions were regularly televised and were often public. As children myself and friends would often find ourselves in the Libyan Palace hotel in Tripoli — playing and running in the corridors past many of the Soviet advisors who lived in these hotels and probably up to nefarious activities including the training of the large Palestinian diaspora in Libya — who Qaddafi sent to the war in Chad — many of them never to return.

I travelled widely in Libya and grew to love it immersely — the ruined tanks in the deserts, the green mountains of Cyrenaica. But I also respected the people, many of whom were dissidents. Most of these were monarchists who had been dispossessed under the new regime and who were not trusted by the government.

In private they would tell us about the rumours of new executions or revealed, as many did, in sordid details of the private lives of the elite. These very same people, I think, blanked us in public in case the security personnel focused on their closeness to British workers. One close friend of mine, from a monarchist family, faked insanity rather than go to fight in Chad. He survived but as a punishment was sent to work in a cola factory.

By the late 1980s it was clear that there was some kind of Islamist opposition developing and we heard of gun battles being waged in the cities. At one point Libyan workers warned foreign migrant workers against the wearing of beards as they were taken as Islamic by gun-totting militias. Demonstrations in the 90s took on an increasingly Islamist hue but it was also clear that the organised Al-Qaeda forces were relatively marginal.

POLARITIES

Being very aware of imperialism, racism and class politics, I knew that Qaddafi was both isolated and multi-classified as a socialist. Having spent time in both Libya and the UK during the miners’ strike, I was very aware of the two polarities popular in left circles — imperialism and anti-imperialism.

At the Anti-Fascist Action Remembrance Sunday demo against the National Front in November 1986 I listened to Royton Bull, then of the International Leninist Party, bang-on about Libya being the workers’ paradise. I pointed out to him and his comrades that, if so, it was one in which the workers were quite regularly executed. “Lies”, he shouted at me, “Lies and imperialist slanders against the Libyan People’s Socialist Arab Jamahiriya!”

In the global working class, however, there was not some abstrac to me. I had seen it in the bonds of solidarity between American, Libyan, British and Filipino workers on the oil-fields of my childhood. Just as I had seen it when I stood against the long ago Sunday morning in Trafalgar Square — the massed ranks of Imperial Whitehall and Horseguards Parade behind me and froth-mouthed pedants and self-de-

tors at each other.

The poor masses, in particular in the vast rural areas of Libya, were in fact completely excluded from these revolutions which were explicitly the goal of the imperialist reinforcement of the ruling clan and its fat financial profits.

This ruling clan has not hesitated to put itself several times at the service of Western imperialism, in intervening in the affairs of different African countries, then becoming the colonial power that intervened openly and with authority in the- European Union from immigration. We therefore uncondi-
tionally support the revolt of the people of Libya in the face of this bloody military intervention. Hence the regime, the invasion forced itself isolated from the world. In this context, Qaddafi was able, town by town, to re-take control of regions which had fallen into the hands of the invaders. He was aided in that by weapons which French imperialist had provided him with, to the tune of 30 million euros in the year 2009 alone.

Imperialism’s cynical gambit was: weaken the insurrec tion, then weaken Qaddafi, make itself the arbiter of the sit uation, re-establish and strengthen control over the region. We cannot repudiate the population of Libya, facing death, for welcoming and favouring any military actions of the coalition — even when that coalition includes the worst criminals, imperialist powers, Saudi Arabia which is fir ing on its own people and intervening in Bahrain. … it is because the aid which they had a right to expect from the world, and in particular from the international pro letariat, never arrived — because for a long time, the pow erful revolutionary organisations which could provide it have not existed. We have to remedy this.

The peoples and the workers should intervene! If any power that the exploited, in any country, anywhere like France, stop being spectators of the situation and intervene to put an end to the capitalist order and its leaders, who are killing the world into poverty and wars.

In the first place, we must be attentive to changes in the military situation, and ready to mobilise, when it becomes nec essary, against any re-run of the Iraqi scenario in Libya, for the withdrawal of any military presence strategically turned against the peoples, and against attacks and extend the revolu tionary process.

The Union of Communist party (group based in Libya) who work closely with the Worker-Communist Parties of Iran, Iraq and Kurdistan. They are in close contact with the Moroccan Revolutionary Marxist Currents.)
Women's role in the Paris Commune

By Jill Mountford

Women's role in the Paris Commune was not limited to the morning of March 18 when a crowd of working class women put themselves between the cannons in possession of the National Guard (the citizen's militia) and the troops of the National Assembly, led by Adolphe Thiers. This action which sparked the revolution.

Throughout the 72-day reign of the Commune, women organised, argued, theorised and fought alongside men to defend and develop the revolution.

The Clubs

Women discussed ideas, argued about demands and expressed their hatred of the church and the state and the role these institutions played in their oppression.

Much of this discussion took place in the various political clubs, many of which were established during the siege (from September 1870 to February 1871) and following the tradition of 1789 and 1848.

During the Commune more clubs sprang up, often in churches that had been taken over by communards.

Paula Mink organised in the clubs. She took an action- overorganisation approach to things and was a “hetero- logically violent and political person.” Mink took part in at least four clubs and shared platforms with working class women.

Working-class women's anti-clericalism was a result of their poverty and position in society. The church was im- mensely wealthy, it controlled education, particularly girls' education. It influenced wages and played a considerable role in driving down the wages of women in the needle trades by undercutting women workers' rates of pay through the charitable labour of needlewomen in the con- vents.

Around 60,000 women and girls were employed in this trade out of 312,000 working women in Paris.

During the siege Mink helped organise the Club de la Victoire, in St Sulpice. She spoke regularly at other clubs. She established a free school for girls, helped organise an ambulance corps, met and strategised with other women, and travelled around the provinces to make propaganda for the revolution.

Mink was not seen (and did not see herself) as a Jacobin during the Commune, but in later years she described her self as a Jacobin-Blanquist.

An example of the anti-clerical rhetoric in the clubs is summed up by the speech of a 16-year-old communard named Gabrielle who appeared in the Club Saint-Sulpice: “We must shoot the priests; they prevent us from doing what we feel is justified by going to church. I therefore urge all women to take hold of all the priests and to burn their ugly mugs off (brûler la garce)! When they are gone, we will be happy. Never fear, .. go with a good heart... I will be the example. To death, to death! That is the cry of revolutionaries. Attack the house of the- ers of hell. To death, to death!” (Few priests were actually shot and no nuns were murdered during the Commune.)

Marriage fared no better than the priests in club discus- sions.

A communard known as La Matelinesse (“the mattress maker”) declared at a Club des proletaires meeting, “I have a 16-year-old daughter, and never as long as I live will she marry... She now lives with someone, and she is very happy without sacraments of the church.”

Mink had a class analysis beyond anti-clericalism: “An example of the present state of society is the rich, who only drink and amuse themselves, without ever troubling them- selves. We must get rid of them, along with the priests and the nuns. We will only be happy when we have no more bosses, no more rich and no more priests.”

After the defeat of the Commune Mink was exiled and did not return to France for 10 years. But on her return she resumed political agitation.

The Union des Femmes

On 11 April 1871, the Journal Officiel (the official news- paper of the Commune) carried on its front page an ap- peal by “un groupe de citoyennes” (women citizens) calling for the setting up of “a women's movement for the defense of Paris”. The appeal went on to say it welcomed “the advent of the reign of Labour and of Equal- ity...”

At the inaugural meeting there was discussion about women's rights. Women's equality should be fought for; practical decisions were taken as to how things should pro- ceed. The meeting agreed to set up local committees in the territories. These committees would recruit volunteers for nursing, canteen work, construction of barricades and staffing barricades.

Along with Eugene Varlin, Lefèvre set up and ran “La Marie”, a cooperative restaurant and meeting place. Later, dur- ing the siege of Paris, other branches of La Maritime were created.

Mink had extensive organisational skills. After the Com- mune she was deported to New Caledonia. Henri Rochefort, founder of the L'intransigeant newspaper, recalled a conversation with her in New Caledonia, she said “Yes since she arrived around 28-29 March after the inaugu- ration of the Commune. Regardless of when she arrived, Dumont said no time in getting involved and organising. Just three weeks into the revolution she published a call to women: call meetings, the decisive hour has arrived. It is time that the old world come to an end! We want to be free! And France is not rising alone, all the civilised people have their eyes on Paris... Citoyennes, all resolved, all united... to the gates of Paris, on the barricades, in the neighbourhoods, everywhere! We will seize the moment... And if the arms and bayonets are all being used by our brothers, we will use- paying stones to crush the traitors!”

Dmitrieff escapes Paris during the Semaine Sanglante (the bloody week of 21-28 May) and flees to Russia where she ends her days in Siberia with her husband, who is exiled there.

André Léo

André Léo was a journalist and novelist. In the late 1860s to the siege she devoted her time to making propaganda for socialist and feminist ideas and using the discussion clubs as a forum.

During the Commune, Léo advocated aggressive broad- based military effort against the Commune and its enemies. She, like Mink and her other partners in the International and his Versailles troops. She argued that the Commune's National Guard must incorporate women. In her memories she remembered that the civil war, unlike the international war, “made for the profits of kings in the interest of thievry and pride” is “the only legitimate war from the perspective of the op- pressed.”

The Commune, for Léo, meant the destruction of class and gender barriers. Léo established the newspaper La So- cialiste whose first issue appeared on 4 April 1871. She used the paper to influence rank and file communards about socialist feminist ideas.

On April 12 she wrote an editorial “Toutes avec tous”, “All Women with All Men”, arguing for men and women to fight together on the battlefield. She pleaded: “Women's help is now necessary... Let them fully participate in the struggle to which they have already given their hearts. Many desire it, and many are able.”

This call for the participation of women on the Commune's executive.

Like Dmitrieff, Lémel, Mink and Louise Michel, Léo did not argue for women's political rights during the Com- mune, largely on the basis that they saw these structures as temporary and believed things would change rapidly. They also regarded social changes to be of far greater immediate value.

Alongside arguing for women's right to participate in the battles as fighters and in a supportive role as nurses, etc, Léo also dared to argue that the Commune's military strategy was wrong.

She argued that they had missed a unique offensive op- portunity to attack the city of Versailles in the early days of the revolution.

She had argued for women's participation in the National Guard during the siege of Paris from September 1870. She concerned herself with challenging gender stereotypes and breaking down the many barriers placed on women. Léo spent her whole political life challenging the dominant ideology of what a woman's role is and she saw education as being the liberating force for women and men.

THE UNIONS DES FEMMES

Natalie Lemel was a member of the French section of the International Working Men's Association, a sea- soned organiser by the time of the Commune.

She was a driving force behind the Union des Femmes along with Elisabeth Dmitrieff. She was active in the book- binders strike committee in 1865-64. She also worked in the union’s mutual aid society and frequently contributed to the discussion club of the 6th arrondissement during the siege.

ELISABETH DMITRIEFF

The other main driving force behind the Union des Femmes was a young Russian émigré and member of the International, Elisabeth Dmitrieff.

Dmitrieff was an active member of the International, as well as being the liberating force for women and men.

THE UNION DES FEMMES

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10 SOLIDARITY
Strike ballots in Lambeth

By a Tower Hamlets worker

Whilst Union members who bear the brunt of any sackings public figures showing that Tower Hamlets has the highest number of child poverty in London and the third highest in the country. The majority of children (57%) in the borough live in poverty (defined as having less than £11 a day to spend after housing costs.) The huge numbers of redundancies in Tower Hamlets include 55 full time posts from in-house home care, 30 posts from Childcare/Continuing Care and 70 posts from Junior Youth Service after school clubs. This means many more people than posts, as a result of the cuts, are left without a job. These cuts, and the colossal losses in services to parents and children in the borough, can only mean that Tower Hamlets re-mains at the top of this particular league table.

The full council meeting which finalised the cuts was triumphant in its success. Councillors congratulated themselves on their work and each other, standing and clapping in a meeting from which all but a handful of protesters had been excluded. Most sickening speeches were from the independent women council- lions who are being sacked, but we’re all fighting for more than that. They are destroying the service we care about because the people who design restructurings don’t understand how it feels to need a library service. We have to protect it.

“It’s time to stop com- plaining to each other or worrying and do some- thing. Otherwise we know next year or the year after there won’t be libraries or youth clubs. There probably won’t be services any- more. What will be left? Jobs at McDonald’s for the lucky ones and the rest of us... I don’t know.”

The workers readings were made or their action was successful, when the protest made it clear that Tower Hamlets had come of age.

Workers who had come of age in the strikes, joined unions and learned how to organise.

Tower Hamlets strikes are a fight against poverty

Pensions: fight like the French!

The generalised attack on pension schemes that the UK gov- ernment is pushing is an unprecedented move.

The French government did the same, going for widespread “reforms” of retirement last year, pushing up the retirement age, and reducing workers’ pension contributions.

The major difference so far is that the French govern- ment was met with a massive strike wave which came close to bringing it down.

The French union leaders- ships first co-ordinated a single strike and protest days in April and May — these were spaced far apart, and although massive, were in tended to be limited, con- trolled shows of force by union leaders to strengthen their hand in negotiations.

But as 2010 wore on and it became clear that Sarkozy had no intention of negoti- ating, union leaders wor- ried that their prestige would be damaged. The action was intensified, with general strikes tabled for September and Octo ber.

The French strikes did not come out of nowhere. French work- ers are not only super-mili tant, but also extremely well-organised.

By Darren Bedford

Two London cen- tres could close as part of a Royal Mail struc- tural shake-up which could see over 700 workers and 1,000 managerial jobs on the chopping block. A further 1,700 head- office posts could go in a future review.

Centres at Nine Elms and Bromley-by-Bow face full close- downs, and Royal Mail bosses have warned of further cuts to come, the company says. That up to half of the UK’s 64 mail centres could face closures in 2014.

Royal Mail has cut around 65,000 since 2002 but claims that voluntary redundancy and natural wastage mean that the current cuts will not affect the workforce.

However, a spokesperson for the Communication Workers Union said “We don’t believe that the closure of two major mail centres in London can be managed without com- pulsory redundancies. We also believe that Royal Mail’s announcement is not in accordance with the existing national agreements we have with the company.”

In a further blow to postal workers, a new valuation of the employee share scheme has re- vealed that workers’ hold- ings in the scheme are now entirely worthless.

The Crown Post Office sites voting recently to take strike action, an unprecedented move by public sector unions. For Royal Mail (particularly at the effen, or sites), this should organise ur- gently to push the union into action against closures and job cuts.

The strikers are also confident that talks with management will be fruitless. The union leader said “these sackings are not attacks on individu- als, but on the trade union movement as a whole.”


discussed why they felt they had to take strike action, the workers were left without a job. The strike action was successful, when the protest made it clear that Tower Hamlets had come of age.

Workers who had come of age in the strikes, joined unions and learned how to organise.

CONFIDENCE

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Libya: opposing forces means helping Qaddafi

By Cliva Bradley

On 17 March, after much procrastination, the United Nations agreed to a no-fly zone in Libya ordering Qaddafi’s army to stop targeting civilians. The immediate disaster — a mass slaughter in Benghazi — has been averted.

The Stop the War Coalition immediately issued a statement condemning “a new war”, and “escalating intervention in Libya”. Socialist Worker headlined “No to intervention immediately issued a statement condemning “a soft landing”. And it seemed that Qaddafi was on the verge of being “propped up” and “booted on the ground” as the generals demonstrated against the one thing which might prevent a second slaughter, prevent Qaddafi’s immediate bloody victory, and therefore a crucial defeat for the wave of revolutions?

It’s not good enough for socialists to point out that Cameron, et al, are no friends of the Libyan people. Indeed they are not. But what do you propose to do, instead, than prevent Qaddafi crushing his enemies? Socialists either address this real, life-and-death question or they are irrelevant poseurs. It’s not good enough for socialists to point out that Cameron, et al, are no friends of the Libyan people. Indeed they are not. But what do you propose to do, instead, than prevent Qaddafi crushing his enemies? Socialists either address this real, life-and-death question or they are irrelevant poseurs.

Instead, some socialists have responded to this crisis by putting their hostility to America above the lives of the Libyan rebels. This is a shameful disgrace.

• More on Libya: pages 8-9

Fight the Tories’ class war budget

By Stephen Wood

The UK Budget will once again be more fuel on the Tory Government’s class war.

The class war being fought by business and the bosses is the economy to withstand and facilitate the worst cuts and attacks on the working class and labour movement since Thatcher. Whatever George Osborne says about the cuts not being a “budget for growth” this is what is going on. Unemployment is rising, living standards are falling. Average earnings are falling. Those trends will continue.

Liberal coalition partners are saying this budget will be more compliant and farer than a straight Tory budget would have been. The facts give the lie to that. Increasing the threshold by which the lowest earners pay tax to £8,000 may seem a small step in the right direction, but coupled with cuts in tax credits, pensions and the rise in VAT, those on the lowest income are still suffering and that will continue.

Recent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) outlines the factors that are involved in a fall in real incomes: first of all, the fact that all of these factors have been acute in the last three years. They are: lower employment, lower incomes on savings, real earnings, and tax and benefit changes. Between 2008-2011 the

George Osborne’s diastem is black.

This is the first time median incomes have fallen in a three year period since 1990-93 and it is the biggest drop since 1980-83. Moreover in the previous 30 years the lowest earners could hardly have expected their incomes to rise. Not so now. The same government is now trying to make living standards even worse.

The IFS statement on the economy, coming days before the “March for the Alternative” is completely uninspiring stuff. While condemning the Chancellor’s budget as bad, they also go on to say: “It is not a recovery. The housing market has fallen into its death question or they are irrelevant poseurs.

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