Harsher benefit tests and sanctions:

MILLIONAIRES’ GOVERNMENT BATTERS THE POOREST

Make rich pay for decent jobs and benefits
No to AV, no to status quo!

By Ira Berovic

With the referendum on Alternative Voting fast approaching, many people in the UK can barely contain their excitement.

People have been torn to faint simply upon knowing that an election circular from either side had arrived in the house, and sales of Eddie Izzard DVD’s have gone up by 341%; a fact we can only attribute to his starring role in the “yes” campaign.

Election material from the “yes to fairer votes” campaign has been delivered to every voter in the country, with a minor storm being generated because black post man Bastian Zephaniah was left off its leaflets for outside of London.

The gallery of other supporters included Joanna Lumley and Tony Robinson, and if the endorsements of Patsy Stone and Baldric aren’t enough to secure your vote, then what will?

There are few consistent political demarcations in the debate — with figures from all three mainstream parties on both sides — most major trade unions have come against AV, GMB, ASLEF and the POA all sent circulars to all members urging them to vote “no”.

But their arguments hardly take working-class democracy as their starting point. The GMB, for example, has concluded that first past the post is a tried and tested system which delivers strong single-party government and that it is simple and easy to understand and with it there is a strong constituency link.

It is hardly the job of the labour movement to defend FPTP; a system which has effectively disenfranchised working-class people in many areas.

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By Ed Mustill

The government has cut the budget of Arts Council England by 30%, or £118 million. Some projects have had their Arts Council funding withdrawn completely. Theatre companies in particular have been hit badly.

Some are criticising the cuts because the “cultural industries” are apparently vital to the British economy. The director of the Serpentine Gallery was quick to criticise the cuts from this point of view in the Evening Standard: “In an HSBC survey, 57 per cent of entrepreneurs thought that the UK’s primary focus should be worldwide cultural industries.”

We need to guard against using this argument in the case against cuts. The Arts’ Council’s ethos has been all about the importance of art in sharpening the competitive edge of Britain’s economy. Some critics, like Mute magazine, who have lost 100% of their ACE funding, say it comes close to seeing art itself as simply a form of entrepreneurship. They are right to say that “the relevant story lies in the devastation being wrought upon the social in general.”

It is likely that one effect of the cuts will be a further concentration of cultural activity in London. While Sheffield Museums, for example, lose all their ACE funding, most of the big winners this year are London-based: the Barbican Centre, the Arcola, the Serpentine... Big publisher Faber and Faber also ranks among the “winners.”

London received half of all the money in the ACE budget. But within this, groups have lost out, including many that promote black and Asian culture. With the Olympic Games coming up, the rest of the country will no doubt see even further from the memory of the chattering classes in the capital.

Some of the ACE funding gap is to be made up from money with the National Lottery, currently listing London 2012 as one of its priority areas. It remains to be seen whether small projects will be able to ride out the cuts like big national organisations. No doubt many will not, unless there is a fight.

Groups like Arts Against Cuts have been a constant presence on, for example, the recent student protests. We must not forget to fight to save the arts as we fight to save welfare and education.

Civil war in Ivory Coast

By Gerry Bates

The UN has intervened in civil strife in ivory Coast as Laurent Gbagbo continues his attempt to cling to power.

In an election which the UN oversaw, Gbagbo was defeated into Alhassane Ou tara but has refused to step down. So we went to press, forces loyal to Ou tara were claiming to have overrun Gbagbo’s residence in Abidjan. UN and French helicopters had previously conducted airstrikes against Gbagbo’s arsenals.

Nearly 500 people have been killed since the disputed election in November, with more than one million fleeing the country. Both Gbagbo and Ou tara have both in the whip and sectarian big, rally against their political rivals, and both have a record of attempting to mobilise working class support despite both being entirely pro-market in their politics. Civil strike between Christians and Muslims, a key feature of political life in other African countries such as Nigeria, has been a factor for many years.

Some have analysed the situation as European imperialism, particularly France, attempting to re-establish a colonial foothold in the country, which is the world’s biggest cocoa pro -ducer. Whatever the impact of this particular imperialist intervention, no socialist should fall into supporting Gbagbo as a progressive “anti-imperialist” against the UN.

Outtara is the formally “legitimate” president of the country but that can’t no resolve democratic questions here. In the long-term ivory Coast’s workers and urban poor — both Muslim and Christian have to unite against all factions of the ruling class, rather than putting their faith in one section against another.

Arts funding slashed
Zimbabwean workers against Mugabe

Mike Sambo of Zimbabwe's International Socialist Organisation spoke to Solidarity.

Tell us about the recent repression in Zimbabwe.

Recent arrests of prominent opposition comrades as well as officials from different trade unions, show the level of confidence of the ruling party to emulate North Africa! The PF's desire to send a clear message to the Zimbabwean working class and opposition — do not attempt to emulate North Africa! Mugabe shares power with two MDC [Movement for Democratic Change] parties (previously the main opposition party) factions in a Government of National Unity after a deal brokered by the South African Development Community in September 2008, following a disputed election which the opposition government opened up some limited democratic space, though Mugabe maintained the upper hand. But the resurgence of repression has also involved the arrest of senior MDC officials. Mugabe is not happy with power sharing and so is attempting to continue the repression and civil society ahead of the upcoming general elections.

What is the situation for the working class?

The advent of the coalition government created some economic as well as political stability. There is less talk of inflation, scarcity of goods, the black market, company closures, etc. Many companies which closed have since reopened. This is primarily because of a multi-currency regime replacing the Zimbabwean dollar. So far this has meant a low level of class struggle in Zimbabwe, as people feel the coalition would be too strong a force to bring in reforms. On the other hand, I think the relative economic stability opens up possibilities of sharper class conflict. For a period sections of the working class formed a common front to remove their common enemy Mugabe. With greater political stability — though this is now wavering — the MGDC, inability of the GNU to deliver as expected, we may see a shift from narrow anti-Mugabe slogans to more gritty social and economic demands that also challenge the profligacy of the MGDC. There is also some advantage of the crisis to make the working class more gritty and organise.

At the moment we see isolated workplace-based clashes between workers and bosses as workers push for economic demands such as a living wage. These struggles are being held back from spreading across the country by the belief of many workers that the MGDC needs to govern alone for there to be genuine change. More conscious workers already challenge the MGDC, given the fact that MDC ministers are involved in attacking the working class. MDC secretary general Tendai Biti is minister of finance and has been at the forefront of attacking the working class.

For the necessary conditions to help them rebuild their shattered lives.

But the government of Berlusconi had no intention of turning back on its ruthless determination to exploit racism — for that he pinned a major part in the prostration of the working-class movement before the sodomy assault agony, job losses, welfare, education and political rights in general. Led by the odious Mauro Moretti, Northern League mayor and Minister of the Interior, it was announced that “a biblical exodus” of the people was on its way to Italy, deliberately inflaming xenophobia and deracinating hopes too widespread in the country. The same Berlusconi announced that among the exodus would not be only those “illegitimate asylum seekers, but also all followers of Allah”. Qaeda bent on seizing territory across the country. What happened was predictable, an example of the putsch depths to which Berlusconi’s regime has taken this country, undermining basic human dignity and democracy. Thousands did begin to arrive to find that not one single act of preparation had been undertaken — no toilets, no water, no food. A population of frightened, Jahren and deracinated masses was left to forage for itself in conditions of in-describable and mounting degradation. All grist to the mill of the racist media, fomenting xenophobia and hatred and ignoring in equal measure, here, in one of the richest countries in the world, about the impossi-bility-of-squashing-movements in 20,000 people. Finally Berlusconi arrived on the scene of the refugee crisis in Naples and the earthquake in Aquila, addressing him-self exlusively to the is-lander.

He never once made reference to the reality sur-rounding him other than to reassure everyone that the refugees would be taken back to where they came from. He promised a new golf course, a casino and freshly painted homes — guaranteed to make the na-tives proud of the prospect of another Las Vegas in Italy.

Let no one in any doubt that what has happened here undermines the profoundly critical depths of the political crisis in which the Italian radical left and trade union movement find itself.

Nothing could express more eloquently than this that the adequate events unfolded, the latter were devoting most of their time to organis-ing protests about the no-fly zone intervention in Libya. That, I believe, says it all.

INDONESIA

Followers of the occupying campaign, Indonesian union SBNI has finally won a recognition agree-ment at the Nescafe fac-tory in Panjung, Nestle, which owns Nescafe, and only recently refused to enter into any collective-bargaining agree-ments in Indonesia — a country seen by multina- tional corporations as a fruit ful ground for sweatshop-style explota-tion. The Nestle victory is not for ILF [the international union federa-tion] and the SBNI only; this is a victory for all Indonesian workers. This is a very historic victory. Finally, in the eyes of the Indone-sian workers will have rights to determine their own wages through negoti-ation."

By Darren Bedford

Workers of the world

Two years ago in Rosarno, southern Italy, thousands of migrant agricultural workers rose up and refused to allow the mass graves the grotesquely obscene living and working condi-tions imposed on them by a mafia-linked network of farmers and the local state.

It was all legitimised by the dictates of both the Italian trade union move-ment. Now the brutal face of Italian racism reveals itself again on the island of Lampedusa, where thou-sands of desperate people fleeing Libya and other coun-tries sought refuge, hoping for the necessary conditions to help them rebuild their shattered lives.

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By Hugh Edwards

Brutal face of racism in Italy

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By Hugh Edwards
New website maps strikes in China

Eric Lee

Manfred Elfstrom, a PhD student at Cornell University in the United States, has produced an extraordinary re-source for the trade union movement. It’s a website called China Strikes (http://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com) and is essentially a map of China with red dots representing strikes.

Elfstrom is taking this quite seriously and is producing some very interesting results. For example, he’s categorised the strikes not only by region, but also by sector.

Some of this will not be surprising — for example, he finds 15 strikes at electronics factories, such as the infamous Foxconn.

There are another dozen strikes reported in auto factories. But click on “sex workers” and you’ll read about a sur-prising protest by prostitutes in Wulian in August 2010. “Only actions by workers over workplace issues are in cluded,” writes Elfstrom. “Thus, land disputes or environ-mental protest, for example, are excluded.”

Accuracy is, of course, essential if the site is to be useful to anyone. Elfstrom writes that “Reports are ‘verified’ when they a) come from a reliable source, such as an NGO that has pro-duced many accurate reports or a major Chinese or foreign news outlet or b) when I can find more than one report of an incident.”

“The site is much more than just a static map to look at. It includes, for example, a sophisticated system of email alerts. If you’re a trade union activist in, say, the food sector, you tell it to email you when a strike breaks out in that sector where you work. You can do the same by region, by clicking on the map. You’ll get an email alert any time a strike happens within 20 kilometres of where you clicked. Elfstrom encourages readers to submit strike news and has an online form to do so — which once again involves clicking on a map to show where the strike is taking place.

Readers can submit photos and detailed descriptions of strikes as well. Though the site is largely in English, there’s a page in Chi-nese that invites workers to submit their strike reports di rectly.

Some of the reports are in Chinese only. So far, the site lists 69 strike reports, three of them from March of this year. The most recent one describes a kinder-garten teachers’ strike in Shenzhen. This is only the tip of the iceberg. There are many more strikes taking place in China.

Nevertheless, it’s an extraordinary use of cutting-edge technology by an individual which could prove very useful for trade unionists who are interested in China — as we all should be.

Horses for courses

I doubt that the most ardent protagonist of “Twitter revolutions” would disagree with Eric Lee’s statement (“How Twitter is like a horse”, Solidarity 197) that social media such as Twitter and Facebook are tools. That does not get us very far. New tools can create new possi-bilities and introduce them to the labour movement and may as he has experimented with new technolo-gies and introduced them to the labour movement and may as he has experimented with new technolo-gies and introduced them to the labour movement and may well agree with much of what I say, but I feel his piece was one of the rather too general, negative responses to the new media did give Egyptian dissidentsthe confidencethat they needed to make a revolution. Social media may help to cre-ate the necessary forces to bring down a regime but are far less useful in the more long term aspects of creating and maintaining institutions and organisations that are dura-ble and can win long term commitment and in form-ing a structure for democratic decision-making, accounta-bility and the formulation of political strategy. These still require largely offline institutions such as unions and par-ties.

“They are not alone and others were prepared to take the same risks and got people to demonstrate at the same time and place, while the marches in Leipzig were dependent on smaller scale personal contacts and the churches’ networks. It seems to me established that social media can serve to make new contacts, mobilise people, organise demonstra-tors and notify both local sympathisers and activists and the outside world of what is happening in real time — all on a larger scale than would otherwise be possible. More contro-versially, and contrary to prominent sceptics Malcolm Gladwell, they can also serve to create a collective identity and strength and build a conduit for solidarity — none of which is to deny the decisive importance of the other factors Eric mentioned. But these are only part of the forms of organisation needed to make a revolution. Social media may help to cre-ate the negative force necessary to bring down a regime but are far less useful in the more long term aspects of creating and maintaining institutions and organisations that are dura-ble and can win long term commitment and in forming a structure for democratic decision-making, accounta-bility and the formulation of political strategy. These still require largely offline institutions such as unions and parties. If “Twitter is like a horse”, then it is a question of “horses for courses”, assessing the appropriate and useful tools for our goals and being neither overawed by the “wow” of new technologies nor insisting that the old ways are always bet-ter.

Bruce Robinson, Manchester

A done deal

An update on last week’s article on the Gal-loway/SPS/SWP/Solidarity electoral bloc. It has been registered with the Glasgow City Council Returning Of-ficer, and will therefore be appearing on the ballot paper, as: The Respect Party – George Galloway (Respect) Coalition Against the Cuts.

Given that “The Respect Party — George Galloway (Re-spect) Coalition Against the Cuts” is a bit of a mouthful, BBC coverage of the elections is already helpfully referring to its candidates simply as being candidates of “The Respect Party”.

The election agent of “The Respect Party — George Galloway (Respect) Coalition Against the Cuts” is a man called Roland Cheetham. McKay has been variously described as Galloway’s friend, political assistant, press-spokesperson, aide, press of-ficer, publishing venture partner, and general fixer. He has held that position since 2007.

Effectively (i.e. in the real world, as opposed to the fan-tasies of the Socialist Party (Scotland) and the SWP), Galloway has control of just about everything — from the party name on the ballot paper, through the financial fundraising appeal, to the election material (as this must be endorsed by the election agent).

Dale Street, Glasgow

Jihad is over

“Socialism is what it is everywhere — weak and still try-ing to get its political bearings. The idea that in the Mid-dle East the ‘masses’ can quickly become socialist, unleash a ‘process of permanent revolution’, and offer a socialist alternative can not but function in socialist observers to dissolve political standards, critical faculties and sober political judgment — and replace them with open-mouthed credulity and naivety towards political Islam.” (Solidarity 3/1999)

Socialism is not the same thing anywhere. The Arab people want to be unafraid to speak and organise. They might well want a dose of consumerism as a reward for their confinement, but it is an insult to them to assume that after their ordeals and struggle they will be prepared to surrender their future to either a corporation or a divine beard. In fact, it’s highly likely that this eruption of political-consciousness has pulled the magic carpet out from under Global Jihad as a strategy for resistance. Any mass appeal it once had is gone.

Posted on the AWL website by the blogger — littlerichardjohn.blogspot.com

Not a joking matter

In defending broadcasting comedian Frankie Boyle’s “joke” about the eight year old disabled son of Katie Price, Channel 4 essentially had this to say: Price had already exploited her son by putting him in the media spotlight, so why shouldn’t we? What a rotten, self-serv-ing argument. You don’t have to endorse Price’s celebrity antics to recogn-ise that making a joke at the expense of a child is wrong. This is Frankie Boyle’s “humour”. Jordan and Peter Andre are still fighting each other over custody of Harvey — eventu-ally one of them will lose and have to keep him.” He went on to say some things involving incest and Harvey’s size which are not worth repeating. Absolutely.

Defend freedom of speech. Certainly. Stretch the bound-aries of “taste” — so that artistic freedom can be expanded? Absolutely.

But this was a) not funny; b) deeply unkind. But most im-portantly it was insincere. Children need protection. Be-cause parents aren’t always up to that job, all the more reason for there to be “official” social boundaries and norms — the best we can do short of a much more democratically organised and equal society — to protect children.

Frankie Boyle and Channel 4 — leave the kids alone! Pick on someone who deserves your pathetic attempts at public humiliation and low-grade spite.

Cathy Negeent, south London

Workers’ Liberty London forum

Wednesday 20 April 7.30-9.30pm
Lucas Arms, 245a Gray’s Inn Rd,
WC1, nr King’s Cross

WHAT SORT OF REPUBLIC DO WE NEED?
Debate with Sean Matgamna,
AWL and Graham Smith,
Republic

The ConDems hope the Royal Wedding will revive par-tisan fervour and distract the nation from their plan to destroy the welfare state and slash the living standards of the working class people. The monarchy is in a bufark of reaction and entrenched power, a fetter on real democracy. We need to get rid of the monarchy, and get what sort of republic do we need?

More details: awl@workersliberty.org
Millionaires’ government batters the poorest

At the same time that its policies send unemployment skyrocketing, the Coalition government is persecuting the unemployed.

On 1 April the Guardian cited Jobcentre Plus workers whistleblowing on a practice of bosses imposing arbitrary targets for throwing people off the dole. Claimants have been deliberately confused tricked into failing stringent obligations placed on them to look for work. Staff at one Jobcentre, for instance, were given a target of three people a week each to refer to “sanctions” i.e. removal of benefits. Individual advisers, teams and regions are being pushed to compete for who can be most deceitful and brutal.

According to DWP statistics, the number of cases where people have lost their benefits soared to 75,000 in October 2011. 20,000 claimants with registered disabilities were cut off. That figure is likely to increase dramatically when people claiming Incapacity Benefit are “reassessed” this month. The work test involved in assessing people who are sick or disabled is notoriously inaccurate — and it has got worse.

According to the Guardian’s analysis, the number of people losing benefits has grown by about 40 percent, far faster than the number of claimants — and grown most in the most deprived areas. Throwing people off the dole is starting to replace pushing people into crappy, low-paid jobs as the main aim of Jobcentres.

While this shift is primarily an attack on the rights of the claimants — and particularly young, uneducated and some disabled people, who are easiest to manoeuvre off benefits — it is also ramping up pressure on benefits workers, under ever greater administrative and psychological pressure to brutalise unemployed working-class people.

So behind the bluster and rhetoric about “fairness” we have a very flimsy scheme aimed at helping middle-class kids get better jobs by giving them more access to internships.

A clampdown on unpaid internships is good, but “tinkering around the edges” is a massive overstatement here. This middle-class government lives in a fantasy world. Tory minister David Willetts has already gone on record blaming “feminism” for social inequality in Britain! The idea that inequality of opportunity in the race to get internships is the key factor behind Britain’s gaping wealth gaps is perhaps less ignorant but no less ludicrous.

In their Telegraph article, Clegg and Iain Duncan Smith (one of the chief architects of the dismantling of the welfare state) are at pains to point out that the target of the new social mobility package is “not just the poor” but the so-called “squeezed middle”, so beloved of mainstream politicians of all three parties.

Ideas for Freedom 2011

Ideas for Freedom is the annual weekend of socialist discussion and debate hosted by Workers’ Liberty.

Friday 8-Sunday 10 July
Highgate Newtown Community Centre, Archway, North London

• Should we be saying “General strike now”? • The rise of the Egyptian working class • Revolution in North Africa, with socialists from Morocco and Tunisia • The fight against cuts: where does Labour fit in? • Celebrating the Paris Commune • Imperialism and Islamism a decade after 9/11 • Iraq 2003, fees and EMA 2010: school student activism then and now • Owen Jones on his book Chavs: the demonisation of the working class • Are socialists “multiculturalists”? • The strengths and weaknesses of anarcho-syndicalism • 70 years since Virginia Woolf’s death • Who was Rosa Luxemburg? • The 1880s: the first British Marxists and the rise of the mass labour movement • An alternative history of the Second World War

Includes a Saturday night social, free creche and accommodation and cheap food.

Tickets bought before the end of May are £18 waged, £10 low-waged/students, £6 unwaged/school students. Book online at www.workersliberty.org/ideas Email awi@workersliberty.org or call 07796 690 874.
In Solidarity 3/199, we printed an “open letter to a direct-action activist” as a contribution to the debate about actions which took place around the TUC-organised 26 March “March for the Alternative”, and the relationship of those actions and the activists involved to the mass labour movement. Ira Berkovic continues that debate by examining arguments which he puts up in defence of the movement among anti-capitalist activists about the mass labour movement and involvement in it.

Argument: trade unions are a spent force. They’re half the size they were in the 1970s; most workers know little about trade unions, if they’ve ever heard of them at all. By focusing your activism on the labour movement and rooting it in trade unions, you’re cutting yourself off from the majority of working-class people.

It’s true that trade unions have suffered historic defeats over the past generation which have diminished their size and power. The decisive defeat suffered in the mid-1980s, when Thatcher succeeded in defeating the miners’ strike, broke the back of the labour movement. It has yet to recover. But why assume that defeat is permanent, and then abandon the political terrain of the labour movement to sell out bureaucrats who currently lead it?

For us, rooting our activism in the trade union movement is not about whether the movement in a given period is stronger or weaker, or whether it has more or less members. Trade unions represent something unique and “special” as social and political forms under capitalism. They are alien organisations implanted in society by some outside force; they are the basic self-defence organisations that workers have always created throughout the history of capitalism. They are an inevitable, organic product of class struggle. In some ways they are a concrete, organisational manifestation of that struggle. They organise workers, as workers, at the point of exploitation in workplaces.

That’s not to say that class struggle only takes place at work, or that only currently-employed workers can participate in class struggle, or that capitalist society does not breed other oppressions (such as gender and racial oppression). But the nucleus of capitalism is the exploitation of wage-labour by bosses. Workplaces — and the self-created organisations which organically emerge in workplaces — are a key site for building and shaping anti-capitalist struggles.

The class-struggle experiences that we experience at work are different from our class-struggle experiences elsewhere. We can form “associations or claimants’ groups” to fight class battles around issues like housing and welfare, but it’s only at work that we’re in a position to organise collectively with our fellow workers to not only disrupt but actually take control of production. Workplaces are capitalism’s engine room, and that means the relationships which exist there and the organisations which emerge are particularly important.

We do not think that existing trade-union organisations are adequate in terms of revolutionary class struggle. We don’t even think they’re adequate for fighting for basic reforms within the framework of capitalism. Within our focus on the labour movement, we fight for very different forms of trade-union organisation — more democratic, more militant, more expansive. We also believe in the need for political organisations for revolutionary workers. But none of that can be built by “going around” the only movement in which workers are currently organised as workers and which still has between six and seven million members. As such it is the only mass movement in British society.

Some comrades, including some anarchist comrades — those who believe in class politics and want to see a militantly workers’ movement — seem to want to build a revolutionary workers’ movement from scratch. Perhaps they think that our approach of revolutionising the existing movement will take too long and is too hard. It certainly may take time, and it will certainly not be easy. But, compared to the goal of building a revolutionary workers’ movement from scratch, the current workers’ movement “outcuts” around the history of trade-union organisations, experiences, history and consciousness of the existing mass labour movement, it is infinitely more possible as well as more necessary.

Trade unions are controlled at every level by the worst kind of sell-outs and bureaucrats. Reactionary attitudes about race, gender and sexuality are still rife within many trade unions and many trade union officials are more interested in maintaining their own position than helping their members organise. The so-called “political wing” of the labour movement, the Labour Party, is led by insipid careerists who’d make pretty much the same cuts the Tories are making.

All true. But if you want the situation to be different, how does it make sense to allow such people’s control of the movement to continue unchallenged?

Again, the relatively better or worse politics of labour movement leaders has never been the reason for working-class revolutionaries to focus their activism in the labour movement. It’s because of the organic relationship of trade unions to the class movement.

The history of the labour movement is full of examples of ordinary workers, trade union members, organising together to wrest control of their unions from bureaucrats and reactionaries in the most adverse conditions imaginable. Rank-and-file networks like the US Teamsters for a Democratic Union even took on the power of organised crime to fight for greater militancy and member-leadership in their union. Democracy activists in the United Mine Workers of America had to contend with their candidate for the union presidency in 1969 being assassinated by the union’s leadership.

Activists in Britain don’t face similar dangers. What stands in our way is the inertia and demoralisation instilled in us by so many years of defeat. But small sparks can light big fires. Already, the student mobilisations of November-December 2010 have inspired significant numbers of workers. Many trade unionists are asking why there aren’t activist networks within their movement capable of organising actions on a similar scale. That’s a question that will bring them into conflict with their own leaderships and bureaucracies.

If the “direct-action activists” (for want of a better term) who currently don’t see the labour movement as a focus for their activism and organising were to turn their energies towards building up grassroots networks inside and across trade unions that could challenge the power of the kind of people we heard speak on the Hyde Park platform of the “March for the Alternative”, a world of possibilities opens up.

Sometimes, struggles to transform trade unions begin as seemingly small-scale battles over very day-to-day issues. The grassroots network that eventually took over and revolutionaryised the New South Wales Builders’ Labourers Federation in Australia in the 1970s first came together to campaign around basic health-and-safety issues on building sites. Workers developed skills and ideas by fighting on the “bread-and-butter” issues, and built up the confidence to then go after the bigger issues too — for example, they fought important environmental battles.

Trade unions only organise in particular workplaces. The most vulnerable and exploited members of the working class — migrant workers, precarious workers and workers employed by high-street corporations like McDonalds and Starbucks — are largely ignored by the trade unions or dismissed as “too hard” to organise. It doesn’t have to be like this. The history of the trade union movement internationally, both recent and more distant, proves it.

Britain’s big general unions — GMB and Unite — trace their origins to the “New Unionism” of the late 19th century. These were a series of struggles, led mainly by revolutionary socialists, to organise workers such as dockers and gas workers — the semi-skilled, precarious and often migrant workers frequently ignored by the old, conservative “craft” unions. New Unionism organised workers on a militantly basis, in contrast to the conciliatory approach of the older craft unions, and won significant victories.

And more recently? In 2006, the small New Zealand union Unite launched a campaign to organise workers working for employers such as McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Starbucks and KFC. These workers were overwhelmingly young and had had little or no contact with trade unions before.

Unite organised on a democratic basis and took on the power of notoriously anti-union corporations that bigger, more established unions had been too timid and conservative to confront.

The Super-size My Pay campaign that Unite ran succeeded in securing the abolition of the discriminatory youth rates of the New Zealand minimum wage, amounting to a serious wage increase for thousands of workers.

The dynamism of the campaign also shook up the rest of the New Zealand labour movement. Unite was affiliated to the NZCTU (the New Zealand equivalent of the TUC) and saw itself as part of an attempt to radicalise trade-union politics across the country, not as a breakdown attempting to build an alternative movement outside of the existing one.

Although the experiences of New Unionism and Super-size My Pay are separated by history, geography and scale, they both prove that hyper-exploited workers can and do organise. The experiences of sweatshop workers from Haiti to Mexico to Indonesia who have taken on their bosses and won prove the same. The more activists believing in the pol-
New Zealand socialists made a conscious decision to dedicate themselves to the work of building it. New Unionism was crucial in the 1880s and 90s. Marx, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett, Will Thorne and John Burns to common socialist activists. The role of Marxistssuch as Eleanor Marx, Trotsky, and Vestas also secured some concessions. The mini-wave of 2009 has put radical industrial direct action back on the agenda for labour movement activists. These actions pose the question of power much more sharply than any number of paintbombs thrown at any number of banks. Your task of revolutionising the existing labour movement could take generations. In unions like Unison, it's incredibly difficult to get the bureaucracy to sanction strike ballots. We can't wait that long; we need to take action that will make bosses and the state sit up and listen now. Passing radical motions in the odd union branch or Trades Council won't make them do that, but radical direct action against the corporate property they care about might. Yes, it might. And Workers' Liberty has never said that direct action of that kind is illegitimate. Far from it. Our members support and have been involved in UK Uncut-type actions and our student members were at the forefront of the Millbank protests in November 2010. There is not necessarily a counterposition between some times organising or being involved in actions of that kind and the longer-term project of revolutionising the existing labour movement. In fact, the two things can have a symbiotic relationship. Millbank did have an impact on the public culture inside the trade union movement. Every picket line that took place in the aftermath of the student movement was full of conversations about what the students had done and whether the trade unions could ever do something similar.

The debate is about where our activism should be based. We believe that many of the activists who are ostensibly on the “other side” of this debate from us are probably much closer to us politically than most of the self-proclaimed “Trotskyst” left with whom we notionally share a tradition. That is why we want to understand and engage with the reasons why so many young activists do not see the labour movement as a necessary political focus. We believe that if we can combine the energy, dynamism, innovation and indeed the militant anger represented by the best of the “direct-action” movement with a consistent focus on working-class organising and a long-term struggle to revolutionise the labour movement, then something like New Unionism becomes possible again.

The New South Wales BLF becomes possible again. The CPE movement becomes possible again. Supersize My Pay becomes possible again. And, ultimately, working-class revolution becomes possible again. Some reading

Teamsters for a Democratic Union: “TDU history”, from TDU – tnyurl.com/tduhistory
Trade union democracy: “How to fight for trade union democracy”, from Solidarity 3/180 – tnyurl.com/tdu
Supersize My Pay: “We can cause the bosses some mayhem”, from Solidarity 3/131 – tnyurl.com/supersizeinterview

Direct action shunts have their place, but what do they help us build in the long run?
The Dublin Labour War

By Sean MacGormna

When Margaret Thatcher’s Tories outlawed “secondary” or solidarity strikes, they knew what they were doing.

The solidarity strike had defeated the ruling class again and again throughout the 1960s and 70s.

When they come out in sympathetic strike, workers act on behalf of interests not directly or narrowly their own.

This is class action far more advanced than mere sectional trade-union action. Implicitly, and sometimes openly, it challenges capitalist rule in society.

That is why the DFTUs, the Labour leaders and most trade union officials hate the idea of the sympathetic strike. They would like to banish both the idea and the memory of it to a museum of labour history.

British workers now face a many-pronged assault by the bosses and their Tory-Lib Dem government. A drive to radically reorganise welfare benefits, to privatise the NHS, cut that sweet-wraps jobs and employment, perhaps even cut trade union legislation. If we don’t fight back, we will be steam-rollered.

The unions must be prepared for a full-scale fightback. An irreplaceable part in this work is the spreading of knowledge of what the working class has been through and has done. And what, if we mobilise and fight, we can hope to do now.

For these reasons in the next three issues of Solidarity we will publish articles by James Connolly. Connolly was one of the best ever propagandists for the solidarity strike, bringing to that work personal experience of labour struggles in Britain, the UK and Ireland.

More than that, these articles were written as part of the greatest working-class struggles in western Europe in the 20th century — the Dublin Labour War of 1913-14 in which Connolly was a central leader. The struggle impressed socialists all over the world, as the article by Lenin below indicates.

Connolly’s brilliant articles following the strike were weapons in that struggle, explaining, rousing and heartening the workers and putting things in the perspective of a historic class struggle.

James Connolly was the chief lieutenant of Jim Larkin, the founder of the modern Irish labour movement. leader of the workers during the 1913 and General Secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. That union became the Irish expression of the great wave of working-class militancy which struck the “UK” in the years before the First World War.

Jim Larkin set up the Irish Transport and General Workers Union in 1908 after the leaders of a British-based union (the ancestors of today’s Unite union) for which he was an organiser sold out the strike he was leading in Belfast.

In the next few years he organised the “unskilled” workers — the coal heavers, dockers, carvers, drivers — of Dublin, thereby creating a new Irish labour movement based on “general”, “unskilled” workers.

Until then unions in Ireland had mainly been small, old-fashioned, skilled craft societies. Larkin was doing in Ireland what had been done in Britain at the time of the “matchgirls” strike and the great London dock strike of 1889, out of which had come Britain’s general unions — a movement known as “New Unionism”.

Using the solidarity strike ruthlessly, Larkin got the bosses on the run and created a new spirit of self-respect and self-reliance in the Dublin working class. No trade, no group of workers was left to fight alone. The weight of the whole union was brought into play on their behalf where necessary. Labour in Dublin was no longer a driven rabble but a movement conscious of itself as a class.

The bosses fought back. They organised a Federation that pledged to “destroy Larkin”. They put money into a common war chest which an individual employer would forfeit if he made peace. Then they gave the workers an ultimatum: leave “Larkin’s union”, have nothing to do with it. ITGWU; pledge yourself never to join it. The alternative? You will be sacked.

But the workers had felt their strength: everywhere they chose to be locked out, facing starvation rather than surrender.

It was open war. In the course of the labour war, three workers were beaten to death by the police and one, a young woman, Alice Brady, was shot dead in the streets by an imported scab.

Lenin: “a new spirit in the unions”

In Dublin, the capital of Ireland — a city of a not highly industrial type, with a population of half a million — the class struggle, which permeates the whole life of capitalist society everywhere, has become accentuated to the point of class war.

The police have positively gone wild; drunken policemen assault peaceful workers, break into houses, torment the aged, women and children. Hundreds of workers over 400 have been injured and two killed — such are the casualties of this war. All prominent workers’ leaders have been arrested. People are thrown into prison for making the most peaceful speeches. The city is like an armed camp.

Ireland is something of a British Poland… National oppression and Catholic reaction have turned the province of this unhappy country into paupers, the peasants into toilers, the workers into the priestly and the bourgeoisie into a phalanx, masked by nationalist phrases, of capitalists, of despots over the workers; finally, the administration has been turned into a gang accustomed to every kind of violence.

At the present moment the Irish nationalists (i.e., the Irish bourgeois) are the victors. They are buying up the lands of the English landlords; they are getting national self-government (the famous Home Rule for which such a long and stubborn struggle has been going on between Ireland and England); they will freely govern “their own” country jointly with “their own” Irish priests.

Well, this Irish nationalist bourgeoisie is celebrating its “national” victory, its maturity in “affairs of state” by declaring a war to the death on the Irish labour movement.

The unions have begun to develop magnificently. The Irish proletariat, awakening to class-consciousness, is pressing the Irish bourgeois scoundrels engaged in celebrating their “national” victory. It has found a talented leader in the person of Comrade Larkin, Secretary of the Irish Transport Workers’ Union. Larkin is a remarkable speaker, a man of seething Irish energy, who has performed miracles among the unskilled workers — that mass of the British proletariat which in Britain is so often cut off from the advanced workers by the cursed petty-bourgeoisie, liberal, aristocratic spirit of the British skilled worker.

A new spirit has been aroused in the Irish workers’ unions. The unskilled workers have brought unparalleled animation into the trade unions. Even the women have begun to organise — a thing hitherto unknown in Catholic Ireland. In one organisation of the workers is concerned Dublin looks like becoming one of the foremost towns in the whole of Great Britain. The country that used to be Mastery of the Belfast Orange. The police, by the body of their comrades. The police brutality is low, not daring to annoy the crowd, and exemplary order prevailed.

The Dublin events mark a turning-point in the history of the labour movement and of socialism in Ireland. Murphy has threatened to destroy the Irish trade union movement, but he has succeeded only in showing the last remnants of the influence of the Irish nationalist bourgeoisie over the Irish proletariat. He has helped to steel the Irish workers against class movements in Ireland, which is free of nationalist prejudices.
On the eve of the lock-out

By James Connolly

Perhaps before this issue of The Irish Worker is in the hands of its readers the issues now at stake in Dublin will have been brought to a final determination. All the capitalistic newspapers of Friday last join in urging, or giving consideration to them or women who toil to maintain their right as men.

The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union! What is it? Let us tell it in plain language. Its fault is this, that it found the labourers of Ireland on their knees, and has striven to raise them to the erect position of manhood; it found them with all the vices of slavery in their souls, and it strove to eradicate these vices and to place them with some of the virtues of free men; it found them with no other weapons of defence than the arts of the liar, the lickspittle, and the toady, and it combined them and taught them to abhor those arts and rely proudly on the defensive power of combination; it, in short, found a class in whom seven centuries of social outlawry had added fresh degradations upon the burden it bore as members of a nation suffering from the cumulative effects of seven centuries of national bondage, and out of this class, the degraded slaves of slaves more degraded still — for what degradation is more abysmal than that of those who prostitute their manhood on the altar of profit-mongering? Out of this class of slaves the labourers of Dublin, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union has created an army of intelligent self-reliant men, abhorring the old arts of the toady, the lickspittle, and the crawler and trusting alone to the disciplined use of their power to labour or to withdraw their labour to assert and maintain their right as men.

To put it in other words, but words as pregnant with truth and meaning: the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union found that before its advent the working class of Dublin had been taught by all the educational agencies of the country, by all the social influences of its masters, that this world was created for the special benefit of the various sections of the master class, that kings and lords and capitalists were of value; that even flunkeys, toadies, lickspittle and pooh-dog had an honoured place in the scheme of the universe, but that there was neither honour, credit, nor consideration to the man or woman who toils to maintain them all.

Against all this the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union has taught that they who toil are the only ones that do matter, that all others are but beggars upon the bounty of those who work with hand or brain, and that the superior value of social value can at any time be realised, be translated into actual fact, by the combination of the labouring class. Teaching, organising, and fighting upon this basis, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union has done what?

If the value of a city is to be found in the development of self-respect and high conception of social responsibilities among a people, then the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union found Dublin the poorest city in these countries by reason of its lack of these qualities.

And by imbuing the workers with them, it has made Dublin the richest city in Europe today, rich by all that counts for greatness in the history of nations. It is then upon this working class so enslaved, this working class so led and so enriched with moral purposes and high aims that the employers propose to make general war.

Shall we shrink from it; cower before their onset? A thousand times no! Shall we crawl back into our slums, abuse our hearts, bow our knees, and crawl once more to lick the hand that would smite us? Shall we, who have been carving out for our children a brighter future, a cleaner city, a freer life, consent to betray them instead into the grasp of the blood-suckers from whom we have dreamed of escaping? No, no, and yet again no! Let them declare their lock-out; it will only hasten the day when the working class will lock-out the capitalist class for good and all. If for taking the side of the Traitors we are threatened with suffering, why we have suffered before. But let them understand well that once they start that ball rolling no capitalist power on earth can prevent it continuing to roll, that every day will add to the impetus it will give to the working class purpose, to the thousands it will bring to the working class ranks and every added suffering inflicted upon the workers will be a fresh obstacle in the way of moderation when the day of final settlement arrives.

Yes, indeed, if it is going to be a wedding, let it be a wedding; and if it is going to be a wake, let it be a wake: we are ready for either.

From Irish Worker, August 30, 1913

Larkin draws a crowd

Who's who

Jim Larkin

A Liverpool Irishman, Larkin was a foreman on the docks there until he sided with his men in strike and was sacked.

He became an organiser for the National Dock Labourers Union which merged with other unions to form today's GMB in Belfast.

There, in 1902, he succeeded for a while in uniting Catholic and Protestant workers in a struggle on the docks. Later, there was a spectacular dispute during which even the Belfast police went on strike!

Union leader James Sexton, who would become a Labour MP and end his days as “Sir James”, sold out the Belfast workers. Strike pay was stopped and a demoralising settlement made over Larkin's head.

Larkin broke away from Sexton's union and started the Irish Transport and General Workers Union.

In 1914 Larkin went to the USA where eventually he was jailed in the anti-red witch hunt, returning to Ireland in 1923 and joining the Communist International. He fought the bureaucracy of the Irish labour movement.

In the Stalinist ultra-left period he drifted away from the “communist” movement. Living through the decades of clerical reation in Ireland, he never repudiated the communism of the Russian Revolution.

When he died in 1947 many tens of thousands of Dublin workers braved the sub-zero temperature to mourn at his funeral.

James Connolly

James Connolly, the son of Irish immigrants, was born in the Irish ghetto in Edinburgh in 1868. He left school at 10 and joined the army at 14.

Back in Edinburgh, he married and, with a job as a dustman collecting “night soil”, stood as a socialist candidate in a local election, losing his job for doing it. Although, like Larkin, he never ceased to be a Catholic, he was both a radical Marxist and a Fenian Irish Republican.

In 1896, he went to Dublin and founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party. He adhered to the “De Leonites” a group of Marxists centred mainly in the United States who made the sort of criticisms of the official socialist movement Lenin would make over 10 years later, when that movement collapsed.

Between 1903-10 Connolly was in the USA where he fell out with De Leon and was an organiser for the Industrial Workers of the World. He returned to Ireland in 1910 and became an organiser for the ITGWU in Belfast. He led the “Citizen Army” into the 1916 Rising in Dublin and was badly wounded. He was shot — strapped in a chair — on 12 May 1916.
Some men, faint-hearted, ever seek
Our programme to retreat,
And will insist, when’tis spoken.
That we demand too much.
Tis passing strange, for I declare
Such statements give me mirth,
For our demands most moderate are,
We only want the earth.

"Be moderate," the trimmers cry,
"You ask too much and people fly
From you aghast in wonder."

Our masters all a godly crew,
Most generous souls! But please observe,
Who se heartsthrob forthe poor,
The "labour fakir" full of guile,
Ifour dem ands were fewer.

Yet, in despite, we’ll see the day
Is all we ever had the nerve
To ask that, is the earth.

The labour fakin’ full of guile,
Base doctrine ever preaches,
And whilst he bleeds the rank and file
Labour shall march in war array
To realize its own, the earth.

For labour long, with sighs and tears,
Tooppressors knelt.
But never yet, to ought save fears.
Did the heart of tyrant melt.
We need not kneel, our cause no dearth
Of loyal soldiers’ needs.

A statement about Libya has appeared on the website of Unite, declaring itself simply to be a “Unite statement” without any indication of what committee of the union it was endorsed by. It seems to have been presented to the national executive as a ready-made “take it or leave it” statement. Its line is “end the intervention now”!

Amongst other spurious reasons, the statement cites the opposition of China and Russia as reasons for straightforwardly campaigning against the intervention — as if the position of these gangster-capitalist, totalitarian states was anything but a benchmark for the trade union movement.

The statement says that the union “holds no brief for Colonel Gaddafi [sic]” and that it “supports the movements for democracy and freedom now developing across the Arab world”, but that’s as close as it gets to actually supporting the Libyan rebellion, while acknowledging that there is any dynamic at work here other than the western intervention.

Could it be that, rather than reflecting a cavalier lack of concern for the fate of the Libyan rebellion amongst the membership of Britain’s biggest union, the statement is more a reflection of the politics of Andrew Murray — Stop the War’s head-buncho, Unite’s national communications and press officer and former employee of Stalinist state news agency Novosti?

Murray is a straight-down-the-line Stalinist Cold War warrior; now that he has endorsed Eastern Bloc is no more, he has replaced it in his world schema with an abstract “anti-imperialism”, which Gaddafi presumably represents on some level. Whatever they think about the situation, Unite members should ask why their union is putting up seemingly unilateral statements on major international issues.

To be fair to Murray, though, he is an out-and-out Stalinist who has never pretended to be otherwise. The politics in Unite’s unit statement is consistent with his tradition. More galling is the recent article from Alex Callinicos, one of Britain’s most prominent “Trotskyists” “intellectuals” (it’s hard to decide to which word Callinicos sports his heading) which gives direct support to the struggle for labour and workers’ movement in US-occupied Afghanistan.

Murray is a straight-down-the-line Stalinist Cold War warrior; now that his beloved Eastern Bloc is no more, he has replaced it in his world schema with an abstract “anti-imperialism”, which Gaddafi presumably represents on some level. Whatever they think about the situation, Unite members should ask why their union is putting up seemingly unilateral statements on major international issues.

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The alternative to this intervention, Greenman writes, would have been a bloody massacre of the democratic forces by a horrific dictatorship — one that the same imperialists supported with money and arms up until yesterday. I also recognise that the Libyan democratic forces have asked for this intervention — while excluding any Iraq-style on-the-ground Nato invasion.

"So — like many of my Arab friends here in France — I am not signing on to the petty-bourgeois left’s one-sided ‘stop the bombing’ campaign, which distorts reality in favour of ‘anti-imperialist’ ideology and objectively supports the ‘anti-imperialist’ Qaddafi’s murderous campaign against his own people […]"

“During most of my life-time the ‘left’ and much of the peace movement supported totalitarian Communist regimes and parties as ‘anti-imperialist’, and now it is objectively supporting that great ‘anti-imperialist’ Qaddafi! When will some people learn that the enemies of our enemies are not necessarily our friends?"

“It is all too easy to soothe the liberal conscience by being against — for example against the US government, which I agree is always motivated by power and greed. Much more complicated to say what you’re for and to develop links of solidarity with people in struggle, like the women and workers’ movements in occupied Afghanistan as well as in the newly vibrant Arab world. Radical posturing may feel good, but what is needed is ongoing solidarity with people in struggle — the long haul — which is not so easy. For those who wish to join the popular resistance, I recommend becoming part of AU Labour Against the War which gives direct support to the struggle for labour and women’s rights in the Middle East.”

"The full article can be read at bit.ly/hdeNa9"
**Army to break strikes?**

By Stewart Ward

The British state is preparing to mobilise the army to break a prison officers’ strike if they take action against the privatisation of Birmingham Prison.

Commenting on the proposed privatisation, Prison Officers’ Association (POA) leader Steve Gillan said the strike was an indication of the workers’ determination. "Prisons should not be run for the benefit of shareholders but for profit. The state has a duty to those imprisoned to ensure the criminal justice system and this coalition government has betrayed loyal public sector workers for their friends in the private sector.

The government has avoided the challenge run the jail to private security firm G4S. The move was part of a “competition” in which companies bid to run one of four prisons put out to tender. Of the three other prisons, Northampton and Wormwood Scrubs, Brixton Hall in Rochdale will remain under state control.

Privately run prisons are bad for people

Private companies like G4S could soon be running all jails in London. The government’s commitment to the privatization of prisons will be tested as part of the strike action. Prisoners will be 석회운이가고, a clear call for action has still not been ruled out. Now confinement will not be able to have a debate about how to defeat the biggest ever attack on our pensions. Unison has been evicted so it’s time to react to these attacks. One can only conclude that the leadership of UCU must not want to fight at all. The government announced the contributions increasing the Comprehensive Spending Review way back in June 2010. Despite this, the strike action on public sector work.*

**Unison leaders betray pension fight**

By a delegate

The standing orders committee (at Unison Health Conference, in session as we go to press) agreed under pressure to allow a motion on the attacks on pensions onto the conference agenda.

We will be debating a motion, submitted by Service Group Executive and Scottish Region on Wednesday 6 April. However at least one motion with a clear call for action has still been ruled out. Now confinement will not be able to have a debate about how to defeat the biggest ever attack on our pensions. Unison has been evicted so it’s time to react to these attacks. One can only conclude that the leadership of UCU must not want to fight at all. The government announced the contributions increasing the Comprehensive Spending Review way back in June 2010. Despite this, the strike action on public sector work.

**In brief**

**NEWCASTLE COLLEGE**

82% of voting members of the University and College Union (UCU) at New College Newcastle have voted to take strike action. Workers will strike on April 12, and campaigners plans to make more than 170 job cuts, of which 75% are teaching posts. In a local economy still being felt the effects of unemployment, cuts of this scale at a large and significant local employer would have an extremely damaging impact.

UCU official Iain Owens said “UCU members here at Newcastle College have made it clear that they will fight these proposals. Our members know that if they go ahead, they will have a devastating effect on the local community. We need teachers teaching people not on the dole queue.”

**LONDON UNDERGROUND**

The RMT has called its ballot of all driver members on London Underground to begin a 24-hour strike next Tuesday. The union is in a long-running campaign to win reinstatement for Arconas drivers. On their lines, RMT office manager Dave Goodwin said ‘We have been able to successfully challenge in the courts the unwarranted suspension and dismissal of the drivers and we are currently in the process of pursuing redundancy. They have yet to respond properly to the claims of the trade union that the suspension is beyond the requirements of the employment tribunal. We have been able to successfully challenge in the courts the unwarranted suspension and dismissal of the drivers and we are currently in the process of pursuing redundancy. They have yet to respond properly to the claims of the trade union that the suspension is beyond the requirements of the employment tribunal. We have been able to successfully challenge in the courts the unwarranted suspension and dismissal of the drivers and we are currently in the process of pursuing redundancy. They have yet to respond properly to the claims of the trade union.”

**Demand an enquiry into Smiley Culture’s death: demonstrate on Saturday April 16.**

Assemble from 12 at the Southbank Club, 124-130 Wandsworth Road, SW8 2DL. More info: on.fb.me/hCa3Oo

**Militant mood in Tower Hamlets strike**

By Darren Bedford

Thousands of striking workers marched and rallied in Tower Hamlets as members of NUT and Unison took action to get as close as possible to a general strike against the council’s budget cuts which will make hundreds jobless.

Countless schools and local government workplaces across the borough were closed for the day. Others had their functioning severely reduced, and most big workplaces had lively attended and high-spirited picket lines. Pickets at the Phoenix and Central Foundation Girls’ Schools turned their section of Mile End Road into a miniature carnival for several hours in the morning, keeping up a constant stream of noise, which was added to by incessant horn-hooting from supportive drivers— in cars, on buses, and on bicycles.

Many Tower Hamlets pickets took the radical step of actually trying to function as picket lines and disrupt the functioning of the workplace, in close conjunction by arguing with scabs and attempting to turn them away. Although some non-union workers (and a small number of union members) cross the picket line at Central Foundation, some were persuaded to turn away.

**March**

A march which began at Weavers Fields in Bethnal Green, where speakers from local activists before setting off on a route that took it to Tower Hamlet’s border with the city of London, where some of the worst poverty in the entire country sits side-by-side with some of the most obscene wealth, it mobilised around 2,000 strikers and supporters.

There had been a controversy over the location of the rally, which took place at the London Muslim Centre (attached to the East London Mosque). Some activists were worried that having the rally in the LMC would be seen as an endorsement of the mosque’s right-wing leadership as against the secular wing of the LMC, which sits within East London’s Muslim communities. That debate will undoubtedly continue in the local working-class anti-cuts campaign (and rightly so), but on the day strike rally itself— and not the debate over its location— that was the focus.

In introducing the rally, Laura Rogers (the president of the East London Poets’ Association) elevated modern working-class militancy in Tower Hamlets within the historical traditions of the borough, mentioning the Bryan & May strike, the Poplar rates rebellion and the Battle of Cable Street. The spirit of the Poplar rates rebellion is currently casting a long shadow over working-class politics in the borough, at least in negative.

The Labour-independent leadership of the council (backed up by the alleged leftists of Respect) are accusing completely to Tory cuts, passing on a cuts budget rather than standing up and fighting back as Poplar did. Over the past year, the Socialist Workers’ Party and their allies—who hold some important positions in the local labour movement— have been unable to let them off the hook. The SWP’s John McCloughlin did well to stress the form that Tower Hamlet’s wealthy, possibly cut-happy mayor, Lutfur Rahman was “a good and honest man” who “genuinely didn’t want to make cuts”.

**Vote**

Although reports that Tower Hamlets workers have “thrown their weight behind calls for a general strike” are unfoundedly exaggerated, there is certainly a mood for a general action.

Mark Serwitkka’s calls for immediate coordinated strike action on public sector pensions received very widespread applause. Whatever criticisms we might make of the demagoguery and hypocrisy of a bureaucrat like Serwitkka, who takes home a fat pay-cheque and whose actions rarely match his words, his call surely be a focus. Immediate coordinated strike action around an issue such as pensions is the first building block in the struggle to create con- ditions in which a general strike might become possible.

When an impromptu indicative vote on who would be prepared to strike was put in the form of a two-choice form that Tower Hamlet’s wealthy, possibly cut-happy mayor, Lutfur Rahman was “a good and honest man” who “genuinely didn’t want to make cuts”.
Libya: from revolution to reform?

By Martyn Hudson

Political and military developments in Libya have continued to move at a significant pace over the last few days. The initially successful rebel onslaught against Qaddafi forces in mid-Libya seemed to promise a decisive attack on the strongholds of Tripolitania and to reform.

The combination of NATO airstrikes and the evacuation of Qaddafi forces in mid-Libya have been involved in talks with the Libyan foreign ministry around some form of negotiated settlement — potentially a transitional government in the hands of the sons of the dictator — Saif al-Islam and Saadi Qaddafi — the ex-IOC president of Benghazi. Both of those had reputations as “moderates” prior to the uprising but they have signalled that a transition without their father’s involvement is not well-coming. Certainly at this point the exit option is not being mooted.

The UN may look at a transitional government without Qaddafi kindiy, particularly in bearing in mind the political weakness of the Libyan Transitional Council holding sway in the east, but France, the US and the UK would certainly be reluctant to perpetuate any remnant of a familial Qaddafi regime — whatever the form of transition — were outright democratic or constitutional monarchy.

Franco, Qatar and Italy have recognised the National Transitional Council but there are very real doubts on behalf of the US and the UK about the composition of the movement. NATO has warned against “flickers” of al Qaeda and Hezbollah in the move.

It is very clear that some of the best fighters in the uprising have been Islamists although it is not clear whether they are linked to the Libyan Islamic Fighting group.

Three historically significant moments did develop over the last week — the destruction of a rebel convoy by coalition forces, the Misrata blockade breaking aid ship taking civilian wounded to “Free” Benghazi and the first oil tanker to be sent out with a supply from the rebel-held east.

What is perhaps significant about each of these episodes is the level of support they display for the air strikes and the coalition intervention on the ground. Rebel forces, in advance of any apology from NATO, noted that the fault for the mistaken strike was random celebratory firing from the cuum, and visibly the level of support on the Misrata ship for NATO was a serious measure of support from those in the thick of the fighting that the support of the coalition has been decisive in halting massacres of civilians in the Qaddafi-held west.

There were two issues that we pointed to last week that have been confirmed as recent events — passed the strength of the movement and the mandate of the government. There will be a full reform in the near future.

Islamists defeat the left in Westminster student elections

By Jade Baker, outgoing UWSU Vice-President Education

Last year, following a big upsurge in student struggle at Westminster University, activists from the Fight Cuts campaign took over and began the process of transforming our union into a genuinely student union.

Now that process will be thrown into reverse as we narrowly lost this year’s election in support of the radical right-wing Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).

At activists to one another in universities, where even more moderate Islamist groups remain on the fringes, this probably sounds a bit bizarre. But Westminster has a huge, possibly even majority Muslim student population, and HT have been building a base here for a long time before the re-appearance of the student left and the antics of thugs of Tripolitania.

This is happening to some extent already but confidence in the rebels’ capacity to take the east may bolster more democratic uprisings in the heartland of the despotism and signal at least the beginning of the end for its vile tyranny.

Syria: democracy protests spread

By Dan Katz

Pro-democracy protests have spread to the Syrian capital, Damascus. On Friday at least 15 people were shot dead in Duma, a satelite of Damascus.

On Saturday, Syrian security forces arrested dozens of protesters, mostly in Deraa and Douma. Those that have been arrested have been brutally and tortured. On Sunday, thousands marched in Duma as eight of those gunned down were buried. The crowd chanted “Down with the regime!”

Hafez Assad ran Syria as a one-party police state from 1971 until 2000. The current President, Bashar Assad, has ruled in a similar way since his father’s death. Posters and statues of both have been defaced during the current protests.

The mobilisations have a potentially sectarian character. Two-thirds of Syrians are Sunni Muslims. However, the ruling family is Alawites, a dissident branch of Shia Islam and only 6% of the population.

Over 100 people have been murdered by the regime during the past two weeks of protests. The state — which is undoing to have psychologically planned its actions — has blamed the shootings on militant conspirators.

Inspired by the revolutions in North Africa the Syrian protests have yet to reach the scale and intensity of the recent mobilisations in Egypt which brought a Mubarak. However, they continue to spread and stretch the state’s forces.