

Chapter 1:

Understanding the crisis

A crisis of capitalism

“**B**usiness always appears almost excessively sound right on the eve of a crash,” wrote Karl Marx in the 1860s. “Business is always thoroughly sound and the campaign in full swing, until suddenly the debacle takes place.”

The economic crisis currently raging across the globe is a *crisis of capitalism* — an economic and social system which by its very nature generates crises. Capitalism has a self-expanding drive to produce more and more for ever greater profits, regardless of the consequences, be they human, ecological — or economic. Eventually it will always overshoot itself, producing more of some commodities than the market can absorb. It generates ‘bubbles’ whose bursting means the destruction of vast swathes of human wealth — until the conditions for a new economic upturn are established.

This phenomenon takes place in a variety of ways. A detailed analysis of the economics of the current crisis is not the subject of this pamphlet; what it is important to understand is that the process is *built in to capitalism*.

It is not an aberration, the result of an overgrown financial sector that can be lopped off leaving a healthy, rational social system in place, as some ‘left-wing’ ruling-class economists claim. The huge expansion of credit, underpinned by a vast web of financial institutions, has undoubtedly contributed to the depth of the crisis, by allowing capitalists to ‘lean further over the edge’ and thus fall further when they finally slip. But credit has always been integral to capitalism, and its growth in the last thirty years is linked to the globalisation of capitalist production and trade. Financial,



industrial and service capital could not be disentangled even if it was rational to try.

For many millions of workers, young people and others across the world, capitalism's credibility has taken a huge blow as it reveals starkly its fundamental irrationality. Many of those people will be starting to think about whether there is an alternative.

In the US, workers came out of the crisis of the 1930s with better wages and conditions and stronger union organisation, because they organised to fight back — through demonstrations, strikes, factory occupations and other forms of militant action

Class struggle will decide

If capitalism by its nature produces crises, then capitalists by their nature will seek to make the working class pay for them. Through wage curbs, job losses, repossessions, cuts in public services, and in a hundred other ways, the bosses are already passing the costs onto the working class and poor.

There is, however, nothing inevitable about them succeeding. Struggle will decide. In the 1930s, the labour movement was crushed in many countries. Yet in the USA, workers came out of the crisis of the 1930s with better wages and conditions and stronger union organisation than they had when they entered it, not because of the generosity of their rulers, but because during the 30s they organised to fight back — through demonstrations, strikes, factory occupations and other forms of militant action — and won.

If a crisis is a good time for capitalists to reorganise, it is also a good time for us to do the same. We can take advantage of capitalism's convulsions, and the newfound contempt and revulsion which millions of workers feel for it, to stop the bosses' attacks and go on the offensive against them. The upsurge at the end of 2008 of class battles in a whole series of countries — from the victory, after a fifteen-year battle, of workers fighting for union recognition at Tar Heel in North Carolina, the largest meat-packing plant in the world, to mass worker and student struggles in European countries including Ireland, Italy, France and Greece — shows the possibilities. So do struggles in Britain like the walk outs in engineering construction, workplace occupations including at Visteon car parts, and battles over pay and jobs on the railways and London Underground.

“Bosses’ socialism” versus workers’ socialism

The capitalist politicians who once shouted loudest in favour of “free markets” — boasting, for instance, about their deregulation of the financial sector — now accept hugely expanded state intervention in the economy. We have seen the government of George W Bush carry out the biggest nationalisations in history. The point is that the bosses' representatives are intervening in the interests of their class; they want to manage the economic slump in the best way for capital and, for the most part, to return to “free markets” as soon as possible.

The banks that some governments have nationalised or part-nationalised have not stopped paying their executives huge salaries; they have not stopped sacking workers; and they have not stopped repossessing the homes and ruining the lives of working-class people. They are still under the control of their bosses, and will be returned to the private sector when it is judged viable.

Even before the recent wave of state interventions, the notion of “free markets” was misleading. For a long time now, the giant enterprises which dominate the economy have, to a great extent, been “socialised” — organised on a vast, society-wide basis, with huge numbers of people working collectively and cooperatively, but under the control and in the interests of the capitalists.



When capitalist governments intervene as they have done in this crisis, they further socialise the economy's losses in order to continue to privatise its gains.

Against this "socialism for the rich", this "bosses' socialism", we want socialism worthy of the name — democratic control of the economy by and in the interests of society's working-class majority, so that the social wealth workers produce can be used for the benefit of all, not a tiny elite of bosses and bankers.

We need a workers' government

To win socialism the working class in every country will need to make a revolution — to carry out a clean sweep of the capitalists and replace the state that serves them with a democratic workers' state. Yet as things stand in Britain and most countries, the big majority not only of the working class, but of the organised labour movement and even its left wing, are not yet prepared (in either sense of the word) to fight for that.

We will seek to convince them: but in common struggle, not just abstract argument. As working-class activists, we propose to all working-class activists and workers' organisations who seriously want to defend our class in this crisis that we fight together, to rally the labour movement for the defence and extension of our rights. We propose rebuilding and overhauling our movement so that it is fit to fight.

We propose re-establishing independent working-class representation in politics, as the basis for a new working-class political party.

We propose that all these struggles, from the smallest up, should be shaped by the goal of winning a *workers' government* — a government based on and accountable to a mass movement of the working class, which at a minimum does for us what the Tories and New Labour in office have done for the bosses and the rich. That is the point of this programme.

Chapter 2:

The nature of this programme

“Transitional demands”: how the fight for reforms can transform the labour movement

At the moment, workers are confronted by the most basic defensive struggles: how to defend ourselves against real-terms wage cuts and an avalanche of job losses, for instance. Isn't it unreal to talk about a workers' government, let alone socialism, when we are engaged in these defensive battles?

In fact, there is a necessary link between these sorts of struggles and the fight for working-class power. Only by fighting for reforms can the working class transform itself and its movement into a force capable of remaking society.

In itself, the demand that every worker should have a job and every job provide a living wage is hardly revolutionary. Neither, for instance, is the demand for state-of-the-art healthcare to be provided free and on an equal basis to every citizen. Such demands can be achieved within a capitalist society — and, to a limited extent, have been in the past, in Britain for instance.

However, these rights were not handed down as an act of philanthropy by the bosses. They were won against the bosses in the course of many decades of working-class and popular struggle (and have been eroded and slashed back since the capitalists once again took the offensive). They represented, in a partial form, elements of what Karl Marx, referring to the Act of Parliament which limited factory labour for women and children to ten hours a day, called “the political economy of the working class” — the law of human solidarity carved out against the cannibalistic, dog-eat-dog values and practices of capitalist society.

If enough people organise, lobby and act — through demonstrations, strikes, occupations of government departments and workplaces, and so on — we can blunt the capitalists' attacks, push them back and eventually win new concessions. But such struggles, however small they start, have the potential to challenge the capitalist system — its ideas, its values, its priorities and its distribution of resources. People drawn into action around one demand — that their workplace be kept open so they can keep their jobs, say, or against NHS cuts — can, particularly if already organised socialists point it out to them, begin to make the links between their struggle, other struggles and the way society is organised. They will think about the world and their place in it. “We” can't “afford” a decent job, or healthcare, for everyone? Then slash profits! Tax the rich! Reallocate resources! Remake society!



Rights and reforms have been won within capitalism — by working-class struggle



To a greater and greater degree, as they interlink and intensify, such struggles can clearly pose the questions of what kind of society we have and who has power in it. Workers ruling themselves in a society run to meet human needs? Or the continued rule of the capitalists to meet the “needs” of a rich minority?

In the current crisis, demands like full employment, a living wage for all and the rebuilding of the health service are not just powerful but potentially explosive. They are what Marxists in the tradition of the Russian revolution, the pre-Stalinist Communist movement and the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism have called “transitional demands” — transitional in the sense that they can help us move from where we are now to where we need to be. Such demands, linked and intertwined in a chain from here to the socialist transformation of society, can help call into existence a growing movement of working-class opposition to the capitalists and their system. If the labour movement mobilises, reorganises, draws in new activists, developing combativity and confidence and learning in action and struggle, it can remake itself — and prepare to remake society.

It is no shock that the time-servers and fakers who currently lead most of our movement have no time for such a perspective. They are no more willing to lead a serious fight for jobs, or against the destruction of the health service, than they are to fight for the overthrow of capitalism — because they accept, in fact if not in words, the values and priorities of capitalism. Part of the point about a programme of “transitional demands” is that it can help workers renew the labour movement in struggle, pushing our leaders to fight and replacing them if they refuse to.

In the current crisis, demands like full employment, a living wage for all and the rebuilding of the health service are not just powerful but potentially explosive

Working-class direct action or government action?

Some of the ideas contained in this programme are proposals for direct action by workers and others — for instance strikes to win wage rises at least in line with inflation. Others, for instance the demand for democratic control over the



banks and high finance, are inescapably proposals for action by a government.

With a high enough degree of mobilisation, workers can impose even highly revolutionary demands on the bosses. In Venezuela, Bolivia and Argentina, for instance, workers have in recent years won control over some workplaces and even companies, successfully

defending them against their former owners and the police, and in some cases getting them nationalised under workers' control. At the same time, such victories will always be partial, unstable and vulnerable to counter-attack while the capitalists remain in power in society as a whole; even forms of organisation such as workers' councils can be gradually stripped of their revolutionary dynamic and neutralised within the structure of capitalist society.

Whether particular demands are achieved before, during or after the overthrow of the capitalists is in the last instance a matter of the balance of forces and the way struggles unfold. For society as a whole to be transformed, however, clearly requires the working class to overthrow the bosses and become the ruling power in society.

In "normal", bourgeois political life, there is a strict separation between direct action struggles by the working class (demonstrations, strikes, etc) and "politics", which happens somewhere else, e.g., in a Parliament bureaucratically sealed off from pressure from below. A bureaucratic, pro-capitalist working-class party like the old, pre-Blair Labour Party, does partially disrupt and soften this division, but still tends to siphon off working-class politics to a professional caste of politicians insulated from the mass movement they may have come from. (With the downgrading and destruction of party democracy and what remained of Labour's organisational links to the unions under Blair and Brown, normal bourgeois political service on the American model is being fully resumed.)

We need to rebuild the labour movement as a force by which the working class can assert itself and its interests at every level of society — from the workplace to the streets to national politics. We need to break down the division between direct action and politics which bourgeois political life imposes on us. A workers' government, resting for its power on the mass organisations of the working class, would represent the working class finally breaking through that wall.

Generally speaking, the demands contained in this pamphlet are reforms which the working class can fight for now *and* a programme for a workers' government to carry out. They are not a one-after-the-other linear time line. In so far as they are achieved prior to the creation of a workers' government, the demands for state action are aimed not at bolstering the existing government, but at strengthening and reinforcing direct action by the working class against it. In all instances our proposals represent an action plan for class struggle, not a detailed, idealised blueprint for a new society.

We hope organisations and activists in particular industries, particular unions, particular campaigns will use this plan as a source of ideas to draw on, expand and develop in order to produce action plans focused on their own particular arena of struggle.

Chapter 3: What to fight for — our demands

A programme for the British working class

As suggested by the references made so far, this is an action programme for the British working class; its demands refer mainly, though not entirely, to the class struggle in Britain. As a socialist tendency based mainly in Britain, we have no desire to pretend that we can declare a detailed programme of struggle for the working class in other countries. At the same time, the class struggle is not fundamentally national but international. While specific demands will vary from country to country, we think that the approach we take here is applicable universally, and hope to collaborate with socialists and working-class activists internationally in elaborating and fighting for it.

Sack the bank bosses — for a single, publicly-owned, democratically controlled banking, pensions and mortgage service

We have seen the banks which are the source of this crisis partial-nationalised not in order to defend the interests of working-class people, but to help the bosses weather the current storm. A case in point is Northern Rock, which since nationalisation has paid its new chief executive Ron Sandler £90,000 a month, substantially more than his predecessor; stepped up sackings; and repossessed homes at a faster rate than it did in the private sector. So is the £600,000 pension paid to Fred Goodwin by the now mostly nationalised Royal Bank of Scotland!

In Britain, the government and the Bank of England have put out, in cash, credit and guarantees, more than £1,100 billion in support for the banks: £18,000 for every child, woman and man in the UK. The working class will have to pick up a large part of the cost through cuts in public spending, higher taxes and so on. The reason why politicians who previously extolled the virtues of unhindered “free markets” have intervened in the banks to such an unprecedented degree is the huge scale of the economic crisis. The labour movement must utilise this crisis to demand that all the banks and financial institutions are taken into full, permanent state ownership.

We need a single, unified banking, pensions and mortgage service organised to protect the jobs, savings, pensions and homes of working-class people, and whose resources can be used for a rational programme of investment to meet social needs. We demand the sacking of the bank bosses and the amalgamation of the various financial institutions under the control of their workers and representatives of savers, pensioners, mortgage-holders and so on.

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Jobs for all — fight job losses, cut work hours, expand public services

The same government that has spent billions bailing out the banks will take no serious action to stop the avalanche of job losses now taking place. Unemployment rose to 1.82 million in the three months to September 2008; by March 2009 it had passed 2 million. The bosses' Confederation of British Industry predicts that it will reach 2.9 million by the end of 2010 — a jobless rate of 9 percent and nearly as high as the figure reached under the Tories in 1982 and 1992. The British Chambers of Commerce, meanwhile, predict 3.1 million unemployed by the end of 2009. Every day brings fresh announcements of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of lay offs in industries from cars and electronics to textiles and retail.

In a society based on exploitation, millions of workers will be denied even the right to be exploited! Clearly the labour movement should not accept this. We must demand jobs for all — real, decent jobs, not further drives to force the unemployed into low-paid, slave labour schemes as New Labour is attempting.

We can start by aggressively fighting every job loss, whether in the private or public sector — which means forcing our unions out of their current complacency and into struggle. We can fight for strikes and mass community mobilisations to oppose sackings. We can adopt tactics like occupying workplaces set for closure — used to great effect by workers at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, Waterford Crystal in Ireland, Prisme Packaging in Dundee and Visteon car parts in Belfast and Enfield. We should demand that firms making mass lay-offs are nationalised without compensation, their bosses sacked and the companies put under the control of their workers.

Meanwhile, we need to put an end to the crazy situation where some of us are forced to work harder and longer, while others are denied a job altogether. The unions should demand a maximum 35-hour week for all workers to create jobs for all those who need them. We should demand shorter working hours but with no loss of pay: profits, not pay, should be cut to reduce the working week and create new jobs.

The alternative is to follow the shameful route the GMB has taken — tell workers to accept



wage cuts to ‘save jobs’ (only existing jobs!) The bosses will rightly interpret this message as a sign of weakness and cut jobs anyway. In winter 2008 the union persuaded its members at Hawick Knitwear, JCB and Cosalt Holiday Homes to accept short-time working and corresponding pay cuts (i.e. with the same hourly rate) — only to be given 90 days’ notice of 280 job losses at Cosalt.

We must oppose Brown’s plans for spending cuts and demand the government taxes the rich and big business to fund a programme of rebuilding public services, at the same time creating millions of secure, well-paid, socially useful jobs. One example: why should we accept tens of thousands of people being homeless or in temporary accommodation, and the dwindling number of council houses falling apart at the seams — at the same time that thousands upon thousands of building workers are thrown on the dole?

To make such campaigns truly effective, the unions need to find ways of organising the unemployed alongside their members, to demand jobs as well as decent benefits, and creating solidarity and a sense of mutual responsibility between these two sections of the working class. Otherwise growing numbers of the unemployed could begin to turn to the far right.

Inflation-proof wages, pensions and benefits; attack inequality

Real inflation is higher for workers and the poor than the official inflation figures suggest, because prices for basic items such as food, heating, rent and transport have risen faster than the average and because such costs make up a higher percentage of spending lower down the income scale.

The unions should calculate their own, realistic figure for inflation as it affects the working class, oppose “wage restraint” and organise industrial and political action to insist, as a minimum, that wages are made inflation-proof, rising automatically as prices rise, in every contract and in law. (This demand



has been partially won before — for example, in Italy, Israel and, in the 1940s, under Trotskyist influence, in the US car industry.) Otherwise the working class will continue to see its standard of living whittled away. The capitulation of the public sector unions to below-inflation pay awards in 2008 demonstrates the nature of the current union leaderships; isolated victories in beating the pay freeze, such as that of the Shell tanker drivers (14 percent over two years) and workers on the London Overground rail line (an average of 22 percent in one year!), show what is possible with determined action.

Oil, wheat, rice and other basic prices fell on world markets in the latter part of 2008. Some cut in retail price inflation is inevitable. Governments are terrified that inflation will tip over into deflation — falling prices — as it did in the 1930s, or in the 1990s in Japan. Strong deflation will almost certainly mean the crisis slides into a long and deep depression. Governments and central banks are pumping fresh credit and cash into economies as never before to try to head off that prospect. But if they succeed in averting deflation, they will probably be setting up the conditions for rapid inflation again at the next turn. Even if prices fall in 2009, we should not think that protecting wages against inflation has ceased to be an issue. We must oppose any moves to cut wages and benefits if average prices levels do drop.

The state pension, benefits and the minimum wage should rise in line with prices or earnings, whichever is higher. Benefits should be enough to live on; the minimum wage set at at least two-thirds median male earnings, currently around £8.80 an hour, with no exceptions. We demand the right to retire at 60 for all workers — the unions' acceptance that millions of new public sector workers will have to work to 65 to receive a full pension was a disgrace. We must fight to defend final salary pension schemes, and insist all workers get decent pension provision. Again, such demands are necessary to bind the whole working class, employed, unemployed and retired, secure and precarious, together in solidarity against the bosses.

At the same time we must demand an attack on the inequality of the tax system. Shift the burden off the working class by phasing out VAT and most indirect taxes; slash income tax for workers, starting with the least well off; tax the rich!

Decent homes for all

Capitalism has turned the most basic human need, somewhere to live, into a gamble in the market. Even with falling house prices, more and more workers will struggle to keep up with mortgage payments, if they own a house at all. As repossessions spiral, we insist: no evictions! Every home-owner facing repossession should have the option of converting their property into rented social housing so they can stay in it.

We urgently need a massive programme of council-house building, under the control of tenants' organisations and housing workers, and the confiscation and conversion of empty/unused properties (90% of which are currently in private ownership) to guarantee quality housing at cheap rents for all.





Stop and reverse privatisation — top quality public services for all — tax the rich!

For almost three decades, our public services have been eaten away by the cancer of privatisation — a process that has accelerated under New Labour, which in December 2008 proposed the partial sell-off of Royal Mail. Privatisation, contracting out, Private Finance Initiatives and so on have not only gutted services, but divided and weakened the organisation of workers in the public sector.

In its 2009 budget, the Brown government announced £6 billion worth of public spending cuts by 2010-11 and a further £9 billion by 2013-14, on top of the £30 billion in “efficiency savings” already under way. Brownite journalist

Polly Toynbee rightly described these cuts as “harsher” than those made by Thatcher. The government also announced a big expansion of privatisation.

For almost three decades, our public services have been eaten away by the cancer of privatisation — a process that has accelerated under New Labour

In privatising our services, and particularly our health service, the bosses have faced mass public hostility, by no means limited to the working class; and yet the labour movement has failed to take advantage of it to mobilise a serious fightback. The tragedy of NHS Logistics, whose workers were organising for a fight against transfer to private courier company DHL, but prevented from taking industrial action by the leadership of their union, Unison, was a vivid illustration of this contradiction. So was the token demonstration the Unison leaders organised in defence of the NHS, which raised no anti-privatisation or anti-government slogans and attracted only 5,000 people!

We must fight for the reversal of all forms of privatisation, contracting out etc, and taxation of the rich and business to revive, rebuild and expand the NHS, education, etc, as 100% public services, this time under the control of their workers and service-users, not businessmen and bureaucrats. Sack the fat cat public sector bosses who are currently attacking our wages and pensions! Scrapping nuclear weapons, cutting back of military spending and so on will also free up much needed resources.

We demand decent facilities for young people, with a big expansion of youth centres, sports clubs, etc. We want an education system geared towards equality of provision for every child, every young person and everyone who wants to learn. That means, as a minimum, a single, comprehensive school system with no forms of financial, academic or religious selection; it means the abolition of all fees and forms of payment and a living, non-means-tested grant for every student over 16. We want education reorganised on the basis of democratic control by students, teachers and education workers over what is taught and how institutions are run, to produce thinking human beings and not docile victims of exploitation. We need a campaigning alliance between the education unions and the student movement to work out a programme of demands for education.

Our starting point in the struggle against privatisation is support for action by the workers in that industry or service. Unlike the NHS Logistics workers, hamstrung by their union leadership, RMT engineers on London Underground succeeded in bringing their employer, Metronet, back into public ownership — after a powerful strike that shut down the whole of London. Only industrial action by postal workers is likely to stop the sell-off of Royal Mail. Such struggles imply a serious fight against the anti-trade union laws which prevent solidarity action and strike action for political goals.

After the 2009 budget, the unions vowed to fight Brown's plans for spending cuts. So far, however, their record on opposing cuts has not been good. We need a different strategy, one which puts industrial action at the centre of the fight to defend and extend public services.

Open the bosses' books! Fight for workers' control!

When the bosses claim that they have no choice but to make lay offs, cut wages, etc, we should respond by demanding to see their company accounts, computer records, etc. — which at present are for the most part shrouded in secrecy, certainly from the eyes of the working class. We should be able to find out where the money is, decide what is and is not “affordable”, determine who is responsible for the crisis and work out our own solutions in our own interests.

If some bosses offer to reveal their accounts on the basis that they really are going bust, their workers should demand their firm be nationalised and, as necessary, converted to produce something more useful. At the same time, we insist: we want to expose the financial dealings of the capitalist class as a whole, not just the accounts of individual bankrupts.

By fighting to open the books, workers can help rebuild their trade union strength and push forward the development of grassroots workplace organisations such as general assemblies and shop stewards' committees. In this process, they can begin to establish elements of *workers' control* at the different levels of the economy, from the running of the smallest workplace to the operations of the biggest multinational corporation. Through determined struggle this control can be extended and deepened, preparing the way for direct *workers' self-management* when a firm or industry is removed from private ownership.

Only a general upsurge of working-class struggle and the establishment of working-class political power will allow the complete expropriation of the capitalists' property. A workers' government could take over even the giant industrial and service corporations, placing them under workers' management and using their vast resources for a programme of social reconstruction.

As the demands outlined so far should make clear, however, there is nothing to stop us demanding the expropriation of particular services, firms or industries as the need arises in the course of struggle. Different industries and companies exist on different levels of development, occupy different places in the life of society and pass through different stages of class struggle. Whether it



is because of their role in a particular public service (e.g., private healthcare companies), their vital place in social life (transport, communications, utilities), the fact that they are making lay-offs or a mass struggle by their workers, it is perfectly legitimate to demand the nationalisation of particular companies before the overthrow of capitalist rule becomes possible.

Genuine expropriation must be different from “Old Labour”-style nationalisation, in which a company is removed from private ownership in the interests of capitalist development, with the old management or state-capitalist replacements for them remaining firmly in control. We oppose compensation for the bosses; fight for workers’ control and the reorientation production towards social needs; and link the question of ownership to broader workers’ struggles and the fight for working-class political power. All that implies a determined puncturing of illusions in Brown’s economic intervention to help the bosses as in any way ‘left-wing’, and opposition to soft-peddalling of these distinctions by, e.g., the Labour left.

Fight for democracy!

More than any other social force, the workers’ movement needs democratic rights and institutions — both to fight effectively under capitalism and to reshape society when it comes to power.

A decade of New Labour in office has meant a steady erosion of democracy in British society. From the destruction of the living channels for working-class

Fight the anti-union laws!

When they finally started to push back the militant trade unionism of the 1970s, the Tory governments of the 1980s tried to screw down the lid by bringing in laws that fundamentally undermined workers’ right to organise and take action. Meanwhile a wave of privatisations and bankruptcies swept the British industrial landscape. Whole sectors of the economy (coal mining, machine tools, docks, newspaper printing, textiles, railways) were shattered, whole communities devastated and huge sections of the labour movement beaten down and broken.

With only a very small amount of tinkering, New Labour has kept in place the laws that make trade unionism in Britain only semi-legal. Tony Blair boasted in 1997 of maintaining “the most restrictive trade union laws in Western Europe”.



**Anti-union laws:
introduced by Thatcher,
maintained by New
Labour**

We need a mass campaign to repeal all the anti-union laws and win a positive charter of workers’ rights — to unionise, strike, picket, take solidarity action and so on. The United Campaign to Repeal the Anti-Trade Union Laws should be supported, but at the moment it is mainly limited to Parliamentary lobbying and occasional protests. To win repeal we will most likely have to confront the laws — break them wherever and whenever we’re strong enough, and keep breaking them until they’re unenforceable.

Since 1997 thousands of postal workers have taken unofficial, illegal industrial action against victimisations and management bullying; Tube workers have refused to work over safety issues and won; and baggage handlers at Heathrow walked out in solidarity with sacked Gate Gourmet catering workers. In general, however, the union leaders have discouraged and undermined illegal workers’ action, rather than championing, encouraging and helping organise it as is necessary.



representation in the Labour Party to control of Parliament by a semi-presidential executive, we have seen deepening bureaucratisation. At the same time, the Blairites have used the threat of Islamist terrorism, and the crime and social break down generated by a dog-eat-dog capitalist society, to unleash a torrent of authoritarian laws strengthening the power of the state over the individual, over oppressed groups and over the working class. “Anti-terror” laws, attacks on the right to protest, attacks on the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers, ASBOs, ID cards, the spread of surveillance technology, erosion of the right to trial by jury and the huge growth in the prison population are all part of this picture.

Reforms like Scottish and Welsh devolution are limited in their significance; others, like the introduction of cabinets in local government and directly elected mayors, are actually anti-democratic. And all this is overshadowed by a political system in which, with the hijacking of the Labour Party, the working class is effectively disenfranchised.

Under capitalism, democracy is necessarily stunted and one-dimensional, and not *just* because it is excluded from the workplace and the economy. Behind the formal — real, but limited and severely eroded — political democracy of Parliament lies a bureaucratic-military state machine with a thousand ties, formal and informal, to the capitalist class. We demand the abolition of the political police (Special Branch) and the secret police (MI5 and MI6); elected committees with control over the police; and trade union and democratic rights in the police and armed forces — as part of our fight to break up the bureaucratic hierarchy that underpins capitalist rule.

Our aim is a workers’ democracy, in which management and representatives are accountable, recallable and stripped of privileges, and in which democracy is extended outwards and downwards throughout society and the economy. Our first task as working-class activists is to regenerate and extend democracy in our own movement, not only democratising the existing structures of our unions, but developing organisations such as workplace assemblies, shop stewards’ committees and so on as the basis of a mass workers’ democracy.

As things stand, however, Parliament is central to political life in Britain, and most workers still have some faith in parliamentary democracy, however

During the 1984-5 miners’ strike, mining communities came up against the full force of the capitalist state



battered. We demand that they take their own ideas seriously. If we are going to use the parliamentary system, by standing independent working-class candidates for instance, then we cannot accept the miserable state we find it in.

We demand the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords, and the reorganisation of Britain as a federal republic whose central parliament is a single, proportionally elected assembly, with annual general elections and voting rights from 16. The government should be elected and recallable by this assembly. No representative or official should be paid more than a worker's wage. We want the abolition of state secrecy and real 'freedom of information'. We want extension of trial by jury and democratic control over the appointment of judges. By weakening the capitalist state's bureaucracy and secrecy, an expansion of democracy can facilitate the struggle for workers' power.

We need a militant fight for the abolition of the whole raft of anti-democratic laws passed over the last thirty years — and, most of all, the replacement of the anti-trade union laws with a positive charter of workers' rights (to unionise, strike, picket, take solidarity action, etc). That in turn will help us regenerate mass involvement and democracy in the labour movement; it is the central question of democratic rights for the working class in Britain today.

For a sustainable economy — nationalise energy and transport, develop “workers’ plans”

The labour movement needs its own programme to fight the threat of climate change, rather than tailing the “Green New Deal” politics of the Green Party and the liberal NGOs.

We can begin by mobilising the labour movement to oppose New Labour's expansion of airports, coal-fired power stations and other ecologically damaging measures. We need a fight in Unite and the GMB to challenge their conservative policies on these issues. We want jobs, but 'green' jobs, not planet-destroying ones!

The gas and electricity companies have been making huge profits at the expense



of “fuel poor” working-class people, particularly pensioners, and the environment. They should be nationalised and run as public services, with an immediate and drastic reduction in bills. Public transport should be taken into public ownership and massively expanded, with local journeys made free and all fares reduced. Under the control of workers, service-users and the representatives of local communities, public ownership of energy, transport and land would allow major investment in public transport, energy efficiency and renewable energy. These measures, together with a programme for converting polluting industries, can form the basis of a working-class-led “just transition” to a sustainable, low-carbon, rationally planned economy.

We need local, national and international alliances between the labour movement, the climate change movement and local communities to develop “workers’ plans” to fight ecological degradation and climate change.

Fight racism — organise all workers regardless of immigration status

A fight against racism in all its forms is one of the most urgent tasks facing working-class activists.

Sharp opposition to anti-Muslim racism, to police harassment of young black and Asian people, to resurgent anti-semitism, is highly necessary, as is opposition to New Labour’s vile legislative witch-hunt against asylum-seekers, its detention centres, its deportations. But this is not enough. *The unions must seek to organise all workers, regardless of immigration status, as part of the fight for open borders.* Anything else means allowing the bosses to laugh in our faces as they divide us. Given the growing importance of migrant labour in the British economy, this is a “to be or not to be” question for our movement. It is true, as racists claim, that migrants are used to push down the wages and conditions of British-born workers. The only solution which is not suicidal from a working-class viewpoint is to unite all workers across differences of origin, skin colour, religion, etc. against the bosses, to win decent wages, conditions and rights for all of us.

We should study and learn from both the strengths and weaknesses of struggles like the 2008 strike of cleaners on London Underground, which saw a highly precarious, super-exploited, mainly migrant workforce win significant wage rises.

For mass self-defence against fascism, and socialist answers to the decay on which it feeds

Meanwhile, the economic crisis will undoubtedly lead to a continued growth of the British National Party and other fascist organisations. The BNP membership list leaked in 2008 suggests that the main fascist party has already grown twenty-fold in a decade, fuelled by New Labour’s record in office and the failure of the labour movement to fight back.

The question of physical working-class self-defence was and will be posed in times of higher struggle by the need to defend picket lines against the police, and the role of flying pickets in large-scale workers’ action (e.g., in the 1984-5 miners’ strike). In the present period, however, the question of self-defence is posed by the still small, but growing fascist threat. Already we have seen an increase in small-scale far-right violence against socialists.

Mass counter-demonstrations, physical confrontation and so on by the labour movement and the organisations of migrants, oppressed communities, etc., are necessary to disrupt fascist activities and defend actions/events and communities threatened with attack. We cannot rely on the police, professional strike-breakers who more often than not will defend the fascists against us. To truly counter the fascist

threat, we need to organise special working-class squads trained in physical defence and combat. In a period of low working-class struggle and few strikes, this will not be an easy task. It is essential, however, to begin propaganda for it in the labour movement now.

If failure to organise such self-defence is one measure of the failure of the 'official' anti-fascist movement, represented by Unite Against Fascism on one hand and Searchlight on the other, failure to develop a social programme to fight racism and fascism is even more disastrous. Unity with 'anti-racist' bosses and capitalist politicians against the BNP is worthless. The far right recruits mainly from lower middle-class elements threatened with ruin by capitalist society and, in a period of low class struggle and a moribund labour movement, from impoverished and demoralised sections of the working class. An 'anti-fascist' alliance of the labour movement — or, more accurately, the trade union bureaucracy — with sections of the ruling class will only strengthen the BNP's appeal as an apparent champion of the dispossessed, or those who believe they are dispossessed.

We need an anti-fascist movement which seeks to mobilise the working-class and poor, black and white, British-born and migrant, to defend ourselves

against the bosses and demand jobs, homes and services for all. The precondition for destroying fascism is a labour movement which appears, not only to workers, but to the middle-class layers on which the far-right organisations feed, as a force capable of remaking society. Nothing else will reliably undercut the growth of racism and the fascists' expanding base.

Fight for women's liberation! Against all oppression!

We will see increased pressure on household budgets, cuts in services and the growth in domestic violence which usually accompanies recessions; and we are already seeing the threat of a resurgent right-wing moralism, represented in its first stages by the campaign of religious organisations, the Tories and the Tory press to cut back access to abortion.

We need a labour movement that fights for women's liberation, and a labour movement-oriented women's movement, demanding equal pay without compromise, defending and extending abortion rights and reproductive freedoms, and fighting for free, universal, 24-hour childcare, well-funded services and other demands to life the burden of domestic labour off



women's shoulders and make equality real. To make these things happen, we need socialists to start taking women's liberation, and the beginnings of a revival in feminist activism, whatever its limitations, seriously.

The farce of equal pay cases in local government and the NHS, which ended with many low-paid women workers suing their own unions over their failure to take on the employers, shows how far we have to go. So does the moralistic, reactionary attitude that much of the left and labour movement takes to sex workers' attempts at self-organisation.

Left activists should work out and fight for programmes for the labour movement to oppose all forms of oppression — from the question of LGBT oppression and sexual liberation to that of the oppression suffered by young people.

Workers of the world unite!

In every country workers are exploited by a ruling class; workers in every country have more in common with each other than with their capitalist — or Stalinist — rulers. Meanwhile the capitalists are organised on a global scale. The British labour movement must end its nationalist

complacency and self-isolation and seek to unite with workers across Europe and the world to coordinate our struggles and fight for a levelling up of wages, conditions and rights. We want the reorganisation of the European Union on a democratic basis as part of the struggle for a Workers' United Europe. "No to the EU" is a British nationalist, not a working-class slogan, whatever 'left-wing' gloss is put on it.

Against political domination, we fight for the right to self-determination of every nation and for consistent democracy. We oppose the occupation of Iraq and the threat of new wars by Britain, the US and their allies in the Middle East, while also opposing political Islam as a reactionary, anti-working class force. We are for an international labour movement fight to impose unilateral disarmament on all nuclear weapons states.

Against both the impositions of the IMF and other international capitalist institutions on poorer countries, and those countries' ruling classes, we support the struggles of workers and peasants. Against the depredations of international capital, we fight for workers' control, social ownership and planned use of the world's resources and technology to abolish hunger, illiteracy and poverty.

We need an internationalist politics based on working-class struggle, not trailing after campaigns of the "Make Poverty History"-type. Our starting point is solidarity for workers' struggles in every country from workers in every other country. Workers of the world, unite!



The British labour movement must seek to unite with workers across Europe and the world to coordinate our struggles and fight for a levelling up of wages, conditions and rights

Chapter 4:

How to fight — renew the labour movement

The balance sheet

“It is difficult for union officials to stand up in front of members and recommend that they should lose pay. It is much easier just to say 'No, no, no' to employers. But it must be an adult dialogue... We must consider all the available tools in the box to keep companies viable and save jobs.”

GMB General Secretary Paul Kenny in the *Financial Times*, 15 December 2008

In 2007, the average salary for a trade union general secretary was just under £80,000, not including a variety of generous benefits

As already explained, the demands set out in this pamphlet are not an architect's drawing for an ideal society; they are an action plan for workers to get organised and fight. But as things stand our labour movement is in no fit state to fight effectively. We need to renovate it from top to bottom.

After more than two decades of defeats, all the indicators are bad: union membership numbers, workplace density, level of activism, number of reps, age profile, growth of bureaucracy... At the same time, we have seen the expulsion of the labour movement from politics by the destruction of Labour Party democracy and the effective abolition of Labour's organisational ties to the unions. Our movement has been reduced to fundraising for just another capitalist political party — in many ways, the most serious and committed party of the ruling class.

Working-class confidence is low; defeats help prevent a revival of confidence, and both low confidence and the bureaucracy help bring about defeats. The 2002-3 national firefighters' strike; Gate Gourmet; the 2007 Royal Mail strike; recent battles over public sector pensions and pay — repeatedly, important groups of workers have shown willing to fight, but opportunities have been closed off by the cowardice or incompetence or unwillingness to fight of the dominant sections of the trade union leadership

When we talk about the trade union bureaucracy, it is not just a term of abuse; this bureaucracy has a definite material basis. In 2007, the average salary for a trade union general secretary was just under £80,000, not including a variety of generous benefits. In January 2008, the *Times* reported that Unite joint general secretary Derek Simpson receives almost £200,000 a year in salary and benefits, including the right to continue to live in his £800,000 Hertfordshire mansion after he retires. Since many unions give generous 'remuneration' to many other officials, not just their general secretaries, such figures are only the tip of the iceberg. Well-fed officials whose lifestyles have more in common with those of the employers than those of their members inevitably have a tendency to set themselves up as intermediaries between bosses and workers, rather than militant fighters for those they represent. That is why we demand that all officials are paid at most something like a skilled worker's wage, with reasonable expenses rather than generous perks, in order to undermine the material basis of bureaucracy.

What is really striking is that the new breed of ‘left-wing’ trade union leaders, the so-called “awkward squad”, elected on the back of frustration with New Labour towards the beginning of this decade, has proved no better on many fundamentals than the old-style business unionist right-wingers. The 2006 public sector pensions and 2008 pay disputes have made that clear. The PCS, led by self-styled revolutionary socialists like Mark Serwotka and the Socialist Party, has distinguished itself primarily by dressing up its capitulations in Marxist verbiage. Now we have not only Blairite-led USDAW responding to 30,000 job losses at Woolworths by calling for Job Centres to find the workers new jobs as quickly as possible, but ‘left-winger’ Paul Kenny advocating wage cuts for his members.

Kenny, along with Tony Woodley of the TGWU and other ‘leftists’, not only refused to nominate left-wing Labour MP John McDonnell to stand against Gordon Brown for Labour leader in 2006, but in 2007 voted for Brown’s abolition of the right of unions and constituency activists to send resolutions to Labour Party conference, effectively abolishing the Labour-union link. These unions also helped Tony Blair avoid a defeat in the Labour Party in the run up to the invasion of Iraq.

There are exceptions: Bob Crow and the leadership grouping in the RMT, for all their serious limitations, are more responsive than the other trade union leaderships, while Matt Wrack of the FBU actually take something like an average firefighter’s wage. But the overall picture is dire.

The lesson is not just one of Kenny, Woodley, Serwotka et al’s individual and political failings, but that *the election of left-wing trade union leaders will not deliver the goods unless part of and backed up by strong movements of rank-and-file union members.*

Turning this situation around will not be easy. Indeed, the economic crisis



How to organise the unorganised

To revive itself, the British labour movement needs to organise the millions of currently unorganised workers. Such work has been done many times before, and can be done again.

At the end of 2008, the trade unions in Britain had 7.3 million members, just over 30 percent of the workforce. In 1978, the figure was 13 million, over 55 percent; it dropped at the start of the 1980s as recession and Thatcher's anti-union laws kicked in, and plummeted after the defeat of the miners, printers, dockers and other groups of workers.

The percentage of workers covered by collective bargaining agreements was 75 percent in 1979, but is only 40 percent today; the number of shop stewards/ reps and the numbers involved in union activity have declined sharply too. The average age of a trade union member is 47. The unions are predominantly concentrated in the public sector, with private sector density at 12 percent. Even in the public sector, it is mainly the core workers that are unionised, with ever increasing use of privatisation and contracting out undermining union organisation.

We need an urgent fight to organise private sector, contracted out, precarious, migrant and young workers; to reach out to the millions of workers currently untouched by the unions and draw them into the labour movement, renewing it in the process.

History shows what is possible. Until the late 1880s, most unions in Britain were craft unions,

organising only a thin layer of skilled and privileged workers. Then, from 1888, came the great wave of strikes which generated the 'New Unionism' among dockers, gas workers, factory and many other industrial workers. The German socialist Friedrich Engels, living in London, wrote excitedly to one of his comrades about this process:

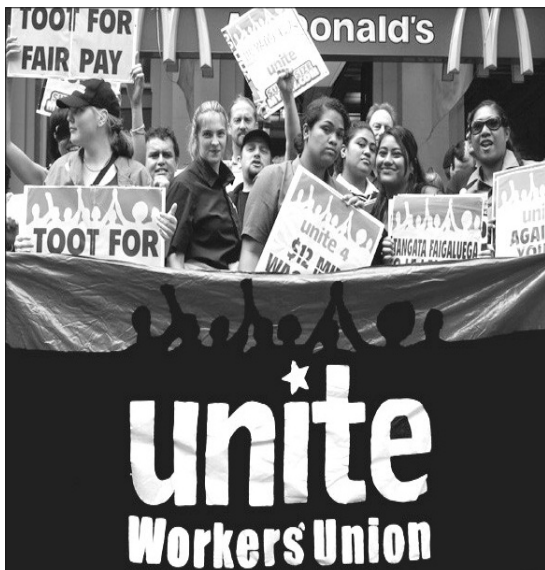
"And these unskilled are very different chaps from the fossilised brothers of the old trade unions; not a trace of the old formalist spirit, of the craft exclusiveness of the engineers, for instance; on the contrary, a general cry for the organisation of all trade unions in one fraternity and for a direct struggle against capital... There you see the difference: the new unions hold together; in the present gas strike, sailors and firemen, lightermen and coal carters are all together..."

These were the retail, catering, call centre, cleaning and office workers of their day.

In New Zealand since 2005, thousands of such precarious, mainly young workers, in McDonald's and Pizza Hut for instance, have been organised into the Unite union through the "Supersize My Pay" campaign. We need similar campaigns here in Britain; and

in fact some work has begun, for instance in organising cleaners in the City of London and on London Underground.

But such campaigns are much more likely to succeed if workers see the unions as a force that can fight and win – not pointless bureaucracies which take your money while failing to protect even their existing members' terms and conditions. *To organise the unorganised effectively, we need to make our unions fight.*



may initially make it harder by further suppressing workers' confidence about what can be won in struggle. Time will tell. What is clear, however, is what we need to fight for.

Reject "social partnership": for a labour movement that fights

Against the ludicrous nonsense of "social partnership", the idea that bosses and workers have fundamental interests in common, we must advocate a trade union movement which fights militantly for workers' interests against the bosses — on pay, conditions, pensions, public services and every other issue. We must fight "social partnership" whether it is an openly proclaimed philosophy or repudiated in words while being accepted in practice.

The ideas developed in this programme can help labour movement activists develop demands to put forward in their unions. In every union and across the unions, we need the development of a 'rank-and-file movement' to push forward our leaders, organise struggles when they won't and seek to replace them as necessary. The current 'broad lefts' are far too much just electoral alliances of the various socialist groups to play this role effectively; socialists must seek to transform them and/or help develop new activist networks.

Workers' democracy

When workers' struggles reach a high enough pitch of intensity, they have a tendency to develop new forms of democracy much more responsive and flexible to working-class needs than parliaments of the sort we have in Britain can ever be.

Russia in 1905 and 1917, Germany 1918-19, China 1925-27, Spain 1936-37, Hungary 1956, Chile 1973, Portugal 1975, Iran 1979, Poland 1980-81, even Britain during the 1926 general strike...

in all these struggles workers created factory/workplace committees that began to link up to form something like workers' councils — a system of democracy in which representatives were denied material privileges, made accountable and could be recalled and replaced as necessary. Such councils can draw in all sorts of other exploited and oppressed groups, and be

counterposed to the capitalists' bureaucratic state machine, forming the basis of a workers' government and workers' state, as the Russian revolution briefly showed.

Obviously, these kind of structures only emerge at a very high level of struggle, and cannot be established at will. We are a very, very long way from creating

workers' councils today. But even mass struggles at a lower level, for instance recent strikes in France, have created 'general assemblies', workplace meetings which mobilise thousands of rank-and-file workers in a way that even trade unions at their best usually fail to do. Such forms point in the direction that the working class will need to move to create its own



British general strike, 1926

system of democracy in future.

In Britain, we can begin by rebuilding our shop stewards' networks, trades councils and so on, and re-establishing general meetings and other forms of workplace democracy through which large numbers of workers can become involved in the running of their movement and the fight against the bosses.

Organise the unorganised!

The average age of a trade unionist in Britain today is 47: we need to renew the labour movement! Sections of the British labour movement have organised the unorganised many times before, in the 1880s and 90s, and during and after World War Two, for instance. In 2009, rebuilding density and organisation in relative strongholds such as the public sector must go hand-in-hand with recruiting and organising those who are at present largely untouched by the unions — private sector, contracted out, migrant, precarious and above all young workers (to a large degree these groups overlap). This can be done by targeted campaigns; but the best way to make such campaigns effective is to show that the unions are a force that can fight and win. No more sell outs like the acceptance of worse pensions for new, mainly young workers in the NHS, education and the civil service!

Rebuild rank-and-file democracy

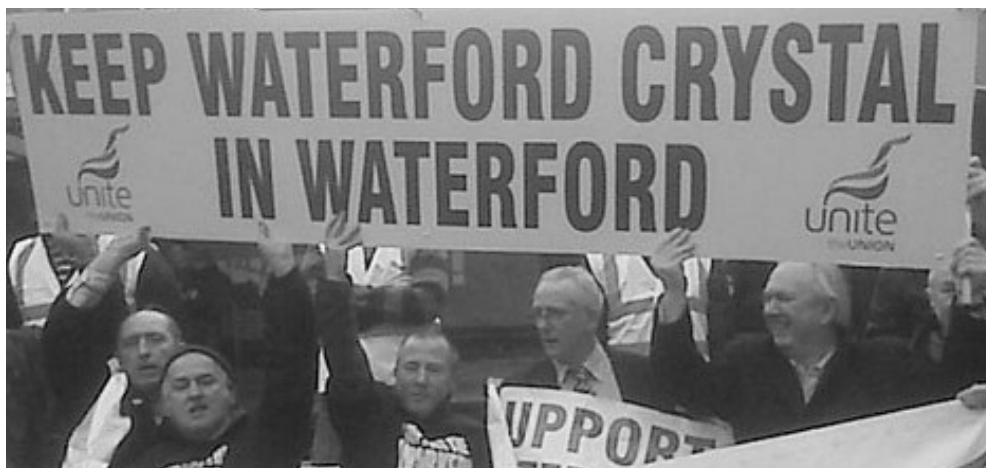
If we are to make our movement fit to fight, we need a concerted drive for democracy and rank-and-file control. That means the democratisation of existing union structures through measures such as an end to political witch-hunts (Unison!); annual conferences and elections; no representative or official being paid more than a worker's wage; and democratic control over officials. It means decisions on industrial action being made in elected strike committees at the level of the dispute. It also means a concerted drive for mass involvement at every level, and a fight to develop grassroots bodies such as workplace assemblies, shop stewards' networks and so on to draw wider and wider layers of workers into struggle and involvement in mass workers' democracy. Both the experience of recent strikes in countries including France, and the history of e.g. shop stewards' movements in Britain, show the potency of such grassroots democratic forms of workers' organisation.

The possibilities of creating such structures will be greater, naturally, in periods of sharp class struggle; but greater, too, if in the preceding period we have prepared the way by strengthening workplace organisation and building rank-and-file movements within the existing trade unions.

Fight the anti-union laws

The democratisation and strengthening of our movement is inseparable from fighting against the anti-trade union laws introduced by the Tories and kept in place by New Labour — laws which make trade unionism only semi-legal in Britain. We need a stepping up of the political campaign to scrap these laws, and replace them with a positive charter of workers' rights — to strike, picket, take solidarity action and so on. Underpinning this fight, however, we need industrial action to break the law wherever possible and, ultimately, make it unworkable. When the baggage handlers at Heathrow broke the law against solidarity action by walking out in support of the sacked Gate Gourmet catering workers, they should have received the applause and solidarity of the entire labour movement. Instead the Gate Gourmet workers' dispute was left to slowly bleed to death.

**We need a
concerted drive
for mass
involvement at
every level of
the unions and a
fight to develop
grassroots
bodies such as
workplace
assemblies and
shop stewards'
networks**



Fight for working-class representation in politics, and a new workers' party

The class struggle does not stop at the door of the workplace; it exists at every level of society and in the last instance is shaped at a society-wide level, *by politics*. We need to rally as much of the labour movement as possible to build a movement for independent working-class representation in politics, as the basis for creating a *new working-class political party*. This may develop in a number of ways: in France, for instance, a small but real new workers' party, the NPA, has grown out of the activity of the organised far left. In Britain, things will be different. For sure, however, this struggle cannot simply take place at the level of the national unions.

To create a real movement, we propose something like local workers' representation committees which can stand independent working-class candidates for Parliament, in local government, etc, with labour movement backing. One way of doing this would be to revive local trades councils as organising centres, both economic and political, for the working class in a given town or area.

It took decades of socialist and working-class organisations standing candidates before the British workers' movement reached the point where the Labour Party could be established; similarly, the NPA has grown in part out of decades of electoral activity by French socialists coming to fruition. The destruction of the Labour Party as any form of working-class representation will make the tactic of independent electoral candidates increasingly important.

It also means that we should not be afraid of advocating that unions disaffiliate from Labour — whether or not that is, in every case, the best tactic immediately. In every instance we should insist that disaffiliation is linked to a positive campaign for workers' representation. Otherwise the danger is of the unions becoming politically inactive (like the FBU since it left the Labour Party in 2004) or looking around for 'friends of labour' in bourgeois political parties (which has been a strong element in the RMT's approach since it was expelled the same year).

Without the compass of independent working-class politics, we will get populist debacles like the Respect Coalition or flawed, self-destructing projects like the Scottish Socialist Party or Communist Refoundation in Italy. Naturally, socialists should fight in whatever new organisations develop, to seek to ensure that they are shaped by consistently independent working-class — revolutionary socialist — politics, and not for instance attempts to recreate the old pre-Blair Labour Party. One part of that will be the subordination of elected representatives to the mass movement outside (including the principle that those elected should take only a worker's wage and donate the rest to the labour movement).

However, revolutionaries, as a small minority in the British labour movement, are likely to be a minority in whatever organisation emerges. We will therefore, without abandoning or ceasing to advocate our broader socialist ideas, seek to make the basic shaping idea of any new movement for workers' representation that it exists to fight for a *workers' government*.

Workplace occupations

"Sit down strikes," wrote the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky in 1938, not long after after huge waves of workplace occupations in France and the US, "go beyond the limits of 'normal' capitalist procedure. Independently of the demands of the strikers, the temporary seizure of factories deals a blow to the idol, capitalist property. Every sit-down strike poses in a practical manner the question of who is boss of the factory: the capitalist or the workers?"

In the current crisis, when tens and hundreds of thousands of workers are losing their jobs, the tactic of occupations looks like it may gain renewed importance. When a company tries to close a workplace, workers can sit in, refuse to leave and prevent the bosses from removing equipment and selling the building. They can use the workplace as a bargaining chip to demand that

their jobs are saved — if necessary by nationalising the firm.

Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago; Calcast engineering in Derry; Waterford Crystal in Ireland; Prisme Packaging in Dundee — and now, in April 2009, the Visteon car parts factories in Belfast and Enfield. All these examples of workers occupying over job losses are on a relatively small scale. Yet they are an example to the rest of the labour movement and may be an indication of more to come.



Sit-down strike at General Motors, 1936, in Flint, USA. The great sit-down strikes of car and other workers in the 1930s transformed the US workers' movement

Chapter 5: What does “workers’ government” mean?

A government of struggle

For the working class to fight effectively implies united struggle by different working-class organisations — unions, trades councils, campaigns, the various socialist organisations. Obviously such ‘united fronts’ can take various forms, depending on the nature, scope and intensity of the struggle; but the general principle is as true for large-scale class battles as for the small defensive ones we are mostly limited to at present.

As we have already noted, many of the demands necessary to defend and extend the rights and living standards of the working class in this crisis are inescapably demands for government action — democratic control over the banks and high finance, for instance. But that in turn begs the question: what sort of government is going to carry out these demands? To pose them as demands on New Labour, or the Tory government which is likely after the next election, is clearly nonsense. We may be able to impose elements through determined action, but the programme as a whole clearly implies a *different kind of government*.

If the various workers’ organisations should unite to defend our class against attacks, and win positive changes, why should this unity in struggle stop at the level of lobbying the existing government? Why should the labour movement, which after all represents the interests of the great majority of people in Britain, not seek to create its own government, which can serve and fight for the working class in the same way that New Labour and Tory governments have served the capitalists and the rich?

The call for a workers’ government is a call on the organised working class to rally itself to win political representation and fight for its political representatives to take power and form a government that will carry out working-class policies. It is the keystone, the logical conclusion of both the notion of a working-class ‘united front’ and the idea of ‘transitional demands’.

Workers’ government or Labour government mark two?

We have had governments based on the labour movement in Britain before, through the Labour Party — but all of them, fundamentally, have rested on the institutions of the capitalist state and carried out policies serving the needs of the bosses (combined, at least in 1945-51, with real reforms for the working class, such as the NHS and the welfare state). Whether a future labour movement-based government will be a more or less radical new installment of previous Labour-type governments, or a workers’ government in a meaningful sense, will be determined by two things:

- Whether a real attack is made on the wealth and entrenched power of the ruling class; and
- Whether it rests at least in part on the organisations of the working class instead of on those of the state bureaucracy, the military and Parliament; whether in response to demands and direct action by the working class it does what we want, or endorses and supports what we do (e.g. strikes and workplace

The origins of the “workers’ government” idea

The term “workers’ government” originates in the pre-Stalinist Communist movement, when the Communist International was still a force fighting for workers’ revolution across the world. The idea was discussed at the fourth world congress of the CI in 1922. The post-First World War revolutionary wave had subsided; in most countries, the labour movement was split between a substantial, but minority, Communist Party and reformist workers’ parties and trade unions of various sorts.

“Workers’ government” meant that the Communists should approach the reformist workers’ parties and organisations to propose joint action to create coalition governments, based on the workers’ movement, that could push through at least a basic “workers’ plan” for the crisis then taking place. It was the logical conclusion of the approach argued for by Lenin and Trotsky over the previous year or so, the “workers’ united front”.

After the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist Parties, Trotsky reformulated the “workers’ government” idea in these terms: “Of all parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers’ and farmers’ government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the programme of the ‘workers’ and farmers’ government’.”

In the USA of 1946, where the workers had no party that spoke in their name, and were tied instead to the Democratic Party, Trotskyist leader Max Shachtman readapted the idea as follows:

“The workers need a party of their own to issue the Declaration of Independence of the working class. It is the first big step in breaking from the capitalist parties and capitalist politics, and toward independent working-class political action.

“However, it is only the first step. The for-

mation of an independent workers’ party acquires great significance only if it proclaims the objective of a Workers’ Government.

“What would be the programme and purpose of a Workers’ Government? Would it simply be to put the workers in the offices now occupied by capitalist politicians and bureaucrats? [No]. A Workers’ Government must have a basically different principle if it is to discharge its great obligation to those who placed it in power. To the evils of capitalism, it must oppose social progress and human welfare. To the interests of a ruling minority, it must oppose the interests of all humanity”.

Today in Britain Shachtman’s adaptation is the most relevant. If our talk of a workers’ plan in the crisis is to make any sense, we must fight for a working-class political agency opposed to Brown and New Labour. But each move to independent workers’ representation “acquires great significance only if it proclaims the objective of a Workers’ Government”.



Max Shachtman

occupations), and avoids becoming a captive of the state machine.

In Britain today, the fight for a workers' government will certainly involve a struggle to elect working-class representatives to Parliament and to win a majority there. And yet to create such a government, and make it real, the working class would also need to organise itself outside the rhythms, norms and constraints of Parliamentary politics. It would need to rebuild its union organisation, trades councils, etc, and establish workplace committees, shop stewards' networks and so on — up to and including workers' councils — as an industrial power that could as necessary dispense with the Parliamentary representatives. Without such organisation, no fundamental transformation of society will be possible.

The bosses will resist

The working class needs to organise itself for direct action in industry and on the streets because the real wealth and power of the capitalists does not lie in Parliament. It lies in their control of the economy, and in the state institutions which they dominate through a thousand ties, direct and indirect: the civil service hierarchy, the House of Lords, the judiciary, and in the last instance the police and armed forces. In a crisis, even the monarchy could become the rallying point for reaction.

A workers' government that attempted really radical change would face a thousand attempts at bureaucratic obstruction, whether peaceful and constitutional or outside the law and, in the final crunch, violent.

That this is not alarmism is shown not just by experiences like Pinochet's 1973 coup in Chile, but by episodes like the dismissal of a mildly reforming Labour government in Australia by the Queen's representative in 1975; the fact, now widely acknowledged, that in the mid 1970s "fairly senior officers" considered a military coup; and the illegal use of the police to smash down the working class during the 1984-5 miners' strike.

The bosses have not had much need to use force since then — but no one should doubt they will if their privileges are seriously threatened. In addition to the army and the police, we may see the growth of violent fascist squads.

To be anything more than a passing episode that collapses in the face of capitalist reaction, constitutional and 'democratic' or violent and openly anti-democratic, a workers' government would have to rely on the mass force of the organised working class outside Parliament — including armed force. It would need to appeal to the rank-and-file soldiers to come over to its side and help organise them against the military hierarchy; it would need to help workers organise and arm flying pickets to form a workers' militia. Only on the basis of such a struggle, to break up the existing state machine





The law of solidarity: “an injury to one is an injury to all”. In 1982 Fleet Street engineers took solidarity action in support of health workers...

and armed forces and replace them with a democratic working-class armed force, could workers’ political power be made secure.

In other words, a workers’ government would either be the prelude to full working-class power throughout society, replacing the old state in a revolution, or it would fall.

All this implies the continued political independence of revolutionary socialists, so we can remain free to criticise the hesitations and half-measures of our allies in forming a workers’ government, and fight for a majority in the working class.

The road to a workers’ government

All that is at the other end of a long road. A big majority of the most militant working-class activists, let alone the working class as a whole, are not yet convinced of this perspective. We will seek to convince them in the course of united action. In the meantime, we propose the idea of a workers’ government as a common perspective that can shape our struggles.

How could a workers’ government come about, concretely? In previous years, before the Blairite transformation of the Labour Party, the fight for a workers’ government involved, in part, using the levers and channels of the Labour Party to fight — to push Labour governments, when they were in office, but in any case to rally those decisive sections of the working class that found their political expression in the Labour Party. Today, however, those levers no longer exist.

The mechanics now are manifold: resisting the bosses’ attempts to make us pay for the crisis; rebuilding workplace organisation through recruitment drives, campaigns, strikes; building up socialist organisation; reviving trades councils; encouraging unions affiliated to the Labour Party to come out openly against the Labour leaders; urging unions to sponsor local labour-representation conferences and support working-class candidates coming out of them... All the small details can be tied together by the overall aim. At the moment it is mostly a matter of painstaking detail work. We don’t know at what stage it may become possible to take big, qualitative leaps forward. But we need to start preparing, clearing the road, mapping out the way, *now*.

Against Viking, Laval, Ruffert, Luxemburg: cross-Europe workers' unity!

Today workers can move freely and easily across most of the European Union. That freedom is a good thing, and makes it easier to build the working-class unity across borders which was an urgent necessity even from a trade-union point of view as long ago as the beginning of the First International, in the 1860s.

But capital is agile. Capital will seek to turn our freedoms against us. In four judgements in 2007-8 the European Court of Justice (ECJ) made it easier for bosses to undermine union agreements in one country by “shipping in” or “posting” entire temporary workforces from other countries.

The Viking judgement: the ECJ ruled that industrial action by the Finnish seafarers’ union against the replacement of a Finnish crew, on Finnish wages and conditions, by an Estonian crew on lower Estonian wages and conditions, was unjusti-

fiable because not “proportionate”.

Laval: the ECJ ruled that it was unlawful for a union to organise industrial action to win terms and conditions for “posted” workers (i.e. workers brought in from another country for a specific contract) above the legal minimum in the country they are coming into. The specific case was action by the Swedish construction union to demand a Latvian subcontractor building a school in Sweden raise wages and conditions for its Latvian workforce to the levels negotiated in Sweden. This ruling particularly affects countries where union agreements are not legally-binding deals, like Sweden and Britain, rather than those where they are legally binding, like France or Italy.

Ruffert: the ECJ ruled against the Niedersachsen state government, in Germany, which had withdrawn a building contract after it found that the (German) contractor had subcontracted to a Polish firm which brought in a Polish workforce on wages and conditions lower than the rates negotiated in Germany.

Luxemburg: the ECJ upheld a com-



Italian workers on strike, against Berlusconi

plaint by the European Commission against the Luxemburg government, which had insisted that Luxemburg conditions apply to workers “posted” to Luxemburg from outside. The ruling compels the Luxemburg government to change Luxemburg law.

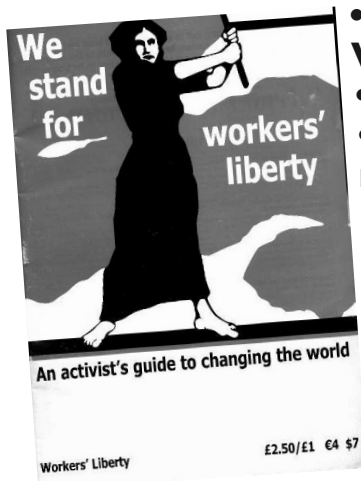
These judgements mean that many groups of workers will need to fight defensive battles to protect their union agreements against undermining by “posted” workers. Beyond those defensive battles, the judgements point to the need for a united workers’ campaign across Europe for directives and legislation that will override them and guarantee to “posted” workers the benefits of collective agreements and legal protections both in their home country and in the one they are “posted” to.

For the defensive battles to be cornered into protectionist slogans like “British jobs for British workers” or nationalist cries like “No to the EU” would be potentially suicidal. Capitalism is international. That clock cannot be turned back, nor do we want it to be. Workers’

only reliable weapon to defend ourselves is unity, across borders and across differences of origin. Otherwise the bosses will be able to play off one country’s workers against another’s, and workers of one origin against workers of another.

The slogan “British Jobs for British Workers”, used in the engineering construction strikes of January-February 2009, has been picked up by the BNP and the far right to fuel hatred of foreign workers and immigrants. If it spreads, this slogan will become a weapon to divide workers, setting longer-settled workers against the maybe two million migrant workers who are a major part of today’s “British” working class — and maybe also against workers born in this country whom the sloganisers consider not “British” enough because of their religion or the colour of their skin. Only the bosses can gain from such divisions.

Workers must direct our anger — and our demands — against the bosses and their governments, not against fellow workers.



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