TAKE OVER THE BANKS!

For public ownership under democratic and workers’ control see page 5
**Solidarity with Spanish miners!**

By John Cunningham, Treasurer Spanish Miners' Solidarity Committee (pc)

Up to 100 billion euros for bankers and nothing for the workers!

Sounds familiar? Yes it's the turn of Spanish bankers to receive a massive hand-out from the Eurocrats in Brussels. It should come as a surprise to no-one that a single euro will go towards helping the Spanish workers who now face the highest unemployment rates in Europe and vicious cuts in welfare and social spending.

Spanish miners, as of 9 July in their sixth week of indefinite strike against the withdrawal of substantial subsidies to their industry, will certainly not expect even a tiny percentage of these staggering sums.

On Wednesday 11 July the Marcha Negra (the Black March) will arrive in Madrid. Some 160 miners from the main mining areas of Asturias and Leon and Castile (joined by comrades from the tiny Aragon coalfield) are marching on Madrid where they plan to camp out in front of the government offices till the end of dispute.

They have received overwhelming support along the way of their march. Many Spaniards now see them as fighting for everyone and this could, possibly, be a factor in tipping the balance of forces in their favour and against the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy, dancing to the tune of the IMF and the World Bank.

Meanwhile strikers in the mining regions continue their war of attrition against the forces of the state, using bat and run tactics such as barricading motorways. No coal is being removed at all and it remains to be seen what the government will do as stocks are depleted.

In Asturias miners supported by local people fought running battles with the hated Civil Guard. On 8 July in the isolated mining town of Cieza, in the mountainous border region between Asturias and Leon and Castile, the Civil Guard ran riot, breaking into people’s homes, trying to terrrife the population.

Talks between the government and the miners appear to have ended before they even began. Government representatives have put nothing on the table and appear to want only to talk about the future of the mining industry in a year’s time (by which time, if the government gets its way, the withdrawal of subsidies will probably mean there is no industry to talk about).

The miners and their families have received their last wages and are hanging down for the long haul. Support from many quarters is now coming in. German miners have donated a large sum and money from the UK is starting to flow into the strike fund. At the request of the Durham Miners’ Association, representatives from Spain will speak at this year’s Durham Miners’ Gala.

We hope that an NUM contingent will visit Spain shortly. It is vital that the Spanish miners understand.

A victory for them will be a victory for us all and will mark the beginning of the fight back against the austerity measures which are afflicting so many ordinary people throughout Europe.

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**How to help**

Consider organising some kind of fund-raising activity. Set up local support groups and publicise their struggles as widely as possible.

The Spanish Miners’ Solidarity Committee has been specifically set-up in the UK to facilitate these ends. It is sponsored by the Durham Miners’ Association and is officially recognised by both the main trade union federations in Spain, the Union of General Workers (UGT) and the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO).

Send donations, large or small, to: John Cunningham (SMSC), 136 Regent Court, Bradfield Road, Sheffield S6 2BH, South Yorkshire. Make cheques payable to: “Spanish Miners’ Solidarity Committee” and send to smsc@talktalk.net and we now have a Facebook site under the name of the Committee.
Privatising homes will endanger children

By a childcare worker

We need to be very clear. The Tories don’t care that thousands of children in society have been exploited and abused. They are not even interested in saving money.

The Newsnight’s coverage on 3 July was part of the propaganda to carry on the continued attack on working class people. We should remember the way the media respond when children from working background are missing. If looked after children received comparable income the papers would be full of pictures of missing children on a daily basis. The tragic fact is that 20% of children in “missing from care” episodes were reported in 2010. Those are only the episodes that were reported. Two-thirds of local authorities failed to meet their legal requirements in proper recording. That is a huge number of children. The number will only increase as children come into care fast.

If we look at how sex workers are treated, many of whom experienced the care system as children, it confirms that the Tories are happy to criminalise those already living in dire situations with few or no choices. Many of the services accessed by these men and women have been decimated by recent cuts.

So, with limited specific services to help support adults and children who experience exploitation and abuse, children’s care workers find themselves trying to implement difficult decisions without guidance from experts.

This raises a complex problem. On one hand, Ofsted and the government have a huge issue with restriiction of liberty and freedom of our children. There are clear guidelines about when restriction of liberty and freedom can be applied. I’m sure nobody is naïve enough to think that our homes are all Tracy Beaker. Our kids are angry, and often very challenging. But most staff will tolerate a huge amount of violence towards themselves before stepping in to physically restrain a child, more often than not they will only do that because the child is putting herself or himself in immediate danger.

On the other hand we are told it is the fault of care staff that our kids are not only going missing but many are being groomed. We are blamed for even letting these kids out of the front door. How do we lock these victims up, and in effect criminalise them?

I therefore propose that these two massive contractions are at the centre of this debate, it is logical to surmise that what the government wants to do is use child exploitation to whack well-organised workers who desperately about the children they look after. This epic tragedy is going to be used as the ‘Tories’ Trojan horse, driven into local authority care homes with the intention to sell them off to the cheapest bidder.

As a worker in a children’s home I find it difficult to deal with the accusation of neglect very personally. I have lost countless nights worrying about kids that have not come home and beyond their job description, they are trying to safeguard children, following abusers, trying to lock the doors or plasters or knocking on doors with the intention of trying to get the children to come back with us.

Staff who have had their pay slashed and conditions changed will still go out and try to protect children, of course they will. They will still provide services such as Child and Adolescents Mental Health Services pushes our role well outside the job description already. Training is necessary now that budgets are cut and is always bottom of the list. Any service sold off.

Privatising homes is not going to stop child exploitation. It is just attacking working-class people and our children.

Save the Women’s Library campaign discusses strategy

By Jade Baker

Campaigners hoping to save The Women’s Library, based at London Metropolitan University held their first public meeting on 6 July. This follows the campaign’s success in garnering support with an online petition that has attracted 12,000 signatures.

The Women’s Library, currently housed in hoteled, funded-supported premises, is under threat from management cuts.

This is not only about a detrimental cut to a vital women’s service but about the future of Higher Education. It will contribute to the government’s vision of a two-tier Higher Education system, in which wealthy “Russell Group” universities will have the best resources by purchasing the assets of poorer universities, like the Women’s Library.

Some speakers from the floor said they have heard much about where the library ended up, as long as the collection stayed intact and was built upon to become a “national resource.” I argued that throughout history the women’s move-
**Higgs is here!**

**Science**

*By Les Hearn*

In January, we reported that CERN was tentatively claiming that Higgs bosons have been created in high energy collisions of hadrons in the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) (“Higgs ahoy”, Solidarity 229, 11 January 2012). They were not certain enough that the signals detected were those of Higgs bosons and said they would be searching further this year, after the LHC’s scheduled shut-down and re-opening.

Now, after analysing trillions and trillions more proton-proton collisions, they have come up with enough evidence to have “99.9997%” that they have discovered the Higgs boson* (or a Higgs boson, since there is a variant on the theory that predicts a family of different sized particles).

The mass of the Higgs is about 126 gigaelectronvolts (GeV), about what was predicted, and is about 134 times the mass of a proton.

So there is, second, I hear you say, GeVs are units of energy, not mass. Ah, don’t forget that mass is equivalent to energy, according to Einstein’s equation, $E=mc^2$, and it’s easier to write and say 126 GeV than 2.2 x 10^{10}.

Wait another second, you say; can you just remind me how two protons smashing into each other can make another particle 67 times heavier than both of them put together?

Certainly: the faster things go, the heavier they become — it’s called mass dilation. Usually, the effect is negligible but when the particles are travelling fast enough and then recombine into all sorts of particles with mass, including some Higgs bosons. Most of the mass, is unstable and break up into other particles which will be detectable. From the latter particles, their masses, charges, speeds and trajectories, scientists infer the existence of the particles formed in the collision. It’s rather like deducing the size of a bullet fired at a vase from the size of the glass fragments, how far they travel and how much damage they cause.

So, if it is the Higgs, why is this important?

Well, it provides support for the Standard Model, which describes the fundamental particles from which all visible matter is made. In particular, the Higgs field explains how particles get their mass. Unfortunately, visible matter totals only 4% of all matter, the rest being obviously, “dark matter”.

So there’s a lot more to work out. And it may not benefit us directly to know the nature of the universe in more detail but it’s quite exciting and it is a bit cheaper than bailing out a bank or re-educating Trident.

And we’ve already had the internet as a spin-off from CERN’s previous work!

“CERN is being a bit tattle-colour about their discovery. It’s definitely a boson and it’s the heaviest one so far found but they won’t finally confirm it’s the Higgs until they’ve studied it some more.”

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**Make Labour fight for NHS**

**By Gerry Bates**

Labour movement activists are organizing a lobby of Labour Party conference at the end of September, to convince Labour to reverse the Tory’s NHS “reforms” and rebuilding our health services.

As the Tories’ NHS and Health and Social Care Act were introduced, there will be no mumps, no federal local authorities — to stop closures, defend and resist the expansion of privatisation.

Such struggles are vital, they are the essential material from which a powerful movement to defend the NHS will be built. At the same time, we cannot defend the health service piecemeal. We need to fight politically too.

Almost by definition, that means placing demands on the Labour Party. By recognising this does not mean putting off resistance to wait for a general election, or relying on the goodwill of the Labour leaders to defend and re-build the NHS.

On the contrary: it means mobilising NHS campaigns and the labour movement — including the Labour-affiliated unions — to bring to bear the maximum possible pressure, and seek to force a commitment from Labour.

That will be a battle. Ed Miliband has pledged to repeal the Health and Social Care Act if he becomes Health Secretary; very likely, all that means is that someone else will get the job. Ed Miliband has explicitly said that he wants to repeal only limited sections of it.

So far Labour has faced almost no demands for ac-countability from our unions on this issue. Labour Party conference is an opportunity to organise our movement around proposals for a clear alternative.

Labour movement organisations including Unite, the Labour Representation Committee, and a growing list of branch unions, trades councils and Labour Parties in the North, are mobilising to lobby Labour Party conference on 30 September around the following demands initiated by the NHS Liaison Committee:

* Labour should return to the founding principles of the NHS: quality healthcare for all, on the basis of need, as a right, in a publicly-owned, publicly-provided, publicly-accountable system. That means:
  * A clear pledge to repeal the Tories’ NHS Act
  * Business out of the NHS: reverse privatisation and outsourcing at every level
  * End PFI and liberate the NHS from exortoriate PFI charges
  * Provision for need, not overgrown bureaucracy: abolish the internal market
  * Decent wages, conditions and pensions for NHS workers
  * Tax the rich to rebuild the NHS and fund quality provision for all

This is an opportunity for a serious mobilisation, which can act as a major focus to boost the NHS campaign. Please back the lobby and help mobilise for it.

* More info, model motions and regular updates: labournhslobby.wordpress.com
* For more information or to order press material: rhisaion@Yahoo.co.uk or ring 07904 944 771

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**Tories’ NHS bonfire continues**

As NHS funding flattines for the third year in a row, A&E departments and maternity services across the country are threatened with closure.

As well as looming battles in North London over A&E services, St Helier in South London, the Alex Hospital, Warrington Royal in the Midlands, and Prince Philip Hospital in Llandelli, are all being considered for closure this month. If the government gets its way then we will have one third fewer A&E departments than we had at the last election.

The closure of A&E departments and maternity services is usually the first step in shutting down a hospital.

NHS bosses claim the closures are necessary as they try to create a multi-tiered A&E service with some hospitals offering urgent care centres for minor injuries. The idea is that patients should self assess to decide whether they need a GP, an urgent care centre or the full-blown A&E service. In fact this is a scheme to allow relatively low risk emergency treatment to be handled outside the private sector. Care UK has already got consent from central care contract centres for Ealing and Brent and will see these as a business opportunity.

NHS bosses in North West London have launched a 14 week consultation over proposals to close four of the nine accident and emergency units in the region, serving 1.9 million people. The proposals are part of a re-organisation programme called “shaping a Healthier Future” championed by Anne Rainsbury, chief exec of NW London NHS Trust, Tory MP Mark Spencer, the MP for Ealing and London medical director.

NHS NW London is suffering financially because of cost-opened PFI payments and a continued programme of cuts. It has already got to save £1 billion over the next three years. The units marked for closure are at Hammersmith, Ealing Cross, Ealing and Central Middlesex hospitals, and a knock on effect would be to downgrade these hospitals, turning them into local hospitals with limited services.

Charing Cross and Ham-mersmith have a combined turn over of 100,000 pa-tients a year with 20,000 emergency admissions. It is inconceivable that these services can be accommodated in alternative units, which are themselves already overstretched.

Campaingns and residents are being bombarded with threats that if the closures are not accepted then hospitals will go bankrupt. We are told we have no choice but to accept and closures will cost that will lives. But the campaign against these proposals is continuing, involving local groups such as Ealing Hospital SOS and Brent NHS Patients Campaign. A public meeting in June brought campaigners together and more meetings are planned.

Spencer has already said that he will be swayed by petitions or political objections. Workers and community campaigners should take this threat seriously and prepare for direct action.

Fights against closures

St. Helier Hospital in Sutton is one of several hospi-tals in London being threatened by ward closures.

The “Better Services, Better Value” panel con-cluded that the hospital’s A&E, Maternity and Pediat-rics wards should be closed.

The newly proposed closures come whilst the hospital is part way through a major £219m renovation project.

Hundreds of local resi-dents attended a meeting in defence of the hospital organised by Labour MP Siobhan McDonagh.

Labour movement activists, health workers and residents are now organise action to defend the hospital.

This includes voicing opposition at the 25 July NHS south west London board meeting, which will finalise the recom-mendations for consultation period.

*Tories*’ NHS bonfire continues

Bankers out of NHS!

While Bob Diamond walks away from his job at Barclays with £22 milli-on, his mate, Barclays vice-chair Naguib Khoury, has assured him a position on the NHS Commissioning Board, which now over-sees the NHS!

Senior executives at Bar-clays have demonstrated they are incapable of run-ning a bank, even on their own terms. But instead of nationalising the banks under local control, the government has put these same bankers in charge of the health system!

We need to get rid of Naguib Khoury from the NHS Commissioning Board and call the whole of the NHS and the banking sector out of banking and into public ownership.

All bankers, kick the bankers out of banking!”

*Dan Rowley*
Five years ago the demand for the public ownership of the banks was the preserve of a small minority of socialists. Today it follows logically from the exposed vulnerability of the banking system.

First the advent of neoliberalism from the 1970s was premised on the renewed role of finance capital. Finance capital became in Lenin’s words “the typical ruler of the immediate process of production”.

Banks were punctuated with moments of meltdown: the stock market crash of 1987; the Asian crisis in 1997; the dot-com bubble; while the economy grew, finance took the credit and got away with abuses.

The second moment was the crash of 2008. The actual collapse of Lehmann and the near collapse of RBS and Lloyds, only averted by the hitherto unthinkable intervention of the state. New light shone on the culture of mismanagement, the arrogance of the gamblers and the impotence of the regulators.

The part-nationalisation of some banks offered a glimpse of another way, except it turned out to be “socialism for the bankers”. Business as usual, the same obscene bonuses while so-called investment banking failed to bolster the recovery of the real economy. Even the chair of the Financial Services Authority described it as “socially useless banking”.

Now we have reached a third stage where the venality of banks, their corruption, their tax evasion and their greed are epitomised by the discredited Barclays. Last year its erstwhile chief executive Bob Diamond collected £17 million in pay and bonuses (plus £5.7 million to cover his tax). In the same year Barclays was ordered to set aside £1 billion to pay customers mis-sold payment protection insurance, ordered to pay £500 million after a tax avoidance scheme was uncovered and now fined £290 million for fixing the Libor inter-bank interest rate.

Barclays is merely symptomatic of the whole banking system. Some 20 banks are reported to be under investigation about fixing Libor. Far from being cut-throat competitors, these banks have run a rather old-fashioned cartel. They were all in it together over payment protection insurance, and no doubt united in their tax avoidance; after all, only the taxpayers know exactly how much tax they evade, the offshore accounts and the semi-legal money laundering actually function.

From the 1980s the bankers saw themselves as the masters of the universe, and for a while that’s what they appeared to be. But they are still at the core of the global capitalist class and much of their power is intact. But the mask has slipped.

There is an opportunity to challenge their power. But what is required cannot be confined to a stage-managed investigation, the punishment of a few scapegoats and a tail more regulation.

No one can trust the government or the courts to take on the banks. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that under Cameron, 51% of the Tory Party funding is derived from the City, with 6% of it from hedge funds and private equity. Cameron is so defensive of his friends that last Friday he had his bag-carriers filibuster a motion promoted by John McDonnell, which would merely give parliament a say over the appointment of the next governor of the Bank of England.

The legal blows and fines may be large compared with the wages of workers on a pay freeze, but the £290 million fine equates to just 4% of Barclays pre-tax profits and far less than the impact of its rate fixing on living standards and economic activity. The interpenetration of finance capital with the British state is summed up by the characters tipped to take over the reins: former top civil servant Gus O’Donnell is apparently in the frame to take over as chair of Barclays.

The Labour leadership are right to call for a wider public inquiry beyond the Libor-fixing, to take in the entire banking system.

Dragging the shady world of banking into the light will diminish the power of the bankers and provide more ammunition for socialists. But Miliband, Balls and their coterie are culpable. Not, as Osborne tried to allege, with a direct link to Libor-fixing. But they did support the neoliberal model, and they were in government while the financial sector proliferated. They endorsed “light touch” financial regulation. They will not seize this opportunity to put the case for public ownership on the political agenda.

What do socialists say? We cannot confine our case to trite calls for investigation, prosecution and punishment of individual bankers, though we want all those things.

The structures of ownership and control have to be challenged.

It is not enough to talk about the separation of retail from investment banking, or of “breaking up” the big banks.

The problem with the banks is not their size; it is the absence of conscious planning for social needs and lack of democratic control. Parcelling up the banking system into smaller fragments will simply result in a melee of competition between the smaller units and the eventual amalgamation of what is left, reproducing the same structures that exist today.

What’s needed was well summed up in Workers’ Liberty’s “workers’ plan” four years ago: “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 other workers and representatives of savers, pensioners, mortgage-holders and so on.”

A century ago the Marxist Rudolf Hilferding wrote in his book Finance Capital that “Even today, taking possession of six large Berlin banks would mean taking possession of the most important spheres of large-scale industry”. He pointed to the intimate links between the banking system and the branches of production such as energy, manufacturing, construction and transport. Hilferding was guilty of an exaggerated rhetorical flourish.

But his insight was sound: socialising finance capital and bringing it under democratic control greatly facilitates the task of overthrowing capitalism. The labour movement should make public ownership and control of the banks central to its agitation.

You can also help our fundraising drive by:

• Taking out a monthly standing order. There is a form at www.workersliberty.org/resources and below. Please post it to us at the AWL, address below.

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

• Organising a fundraising event.

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

• Get in touch to discuss joining the AWL.

More information: 07976 690 874 / awl@workersliberty.org / AWL, 20E Tower Workshops, 58 Riley Rd, SE1 3DC.

At Ideas for Freedom we raised over £2,200 for our fundraising drive. If we raise the same again between now and September we will be on track to meet our target.

The summer time offers many opportunities for raising funds. Why not organise a Workers’ Liberty branch in your area? 60% of the money we raise at IFF came from selling our specially produced “Liberty Ale”; now is the time to be as creative while raising the funds we need to keep the organisation fighting the battle for socialism.

In the long summer evenings, as the weather improves (we hope), people may be more likely to stop and chat at a public paper sale or stall. Make sure you have got your Solidarity subscription forms at hand so that more people can receive our news reports, working-class history and dispatches from the front lines of the class struggle.

Take the banks!
The Labour Left at its worst

By Jon Lansman

About a hundred people gathered in London on Saturday [7 July] to determine the future of Labour Briefing, whether it should remain an independent magazine or become the house journal of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) of which John McDonnell is the chair.

It decided, by 44 to 37 votes with a few abstentions, to go with the LRC. Although the debate was surprisingly cordial and logical on the day, it was an old-fashioned faction-fight with people on both sides seething with anger and bitterness.

London Labour Briefing, as it was called at its inception, arose as the mouth piece of the organisation which Ken Livingstone leader of the Greater London Council in 1981, and saw the left sweep to power in town halls across London the following year. Cuts in council income and spending saw its base narrow amid recriminations after the collapse of the campaign against rate-capping and bitter divisions between Ken and his then deputy, John McDonnell.

There are different views on why it has disappeared under the wing of the LRC. Some argue that the real cause was a falling out between personalities [in Briefing] which escalated and led to the withdrawal from its editorial board of Graham Bash, who had been a mainstay since its inception.

Some other longstanding supporters believed Briefing could not (or perhaps should not) survive his departure, and argued that if it needed to link with the LRC and precipitated the "merger" or "takeover" (depending on your perspective).

The matter was inevitably contentious within the LRC too. Of the advocates of merger, some wanted to see the LRC hosting a journal which would be genuinely independent, while others wanted the LRC to have a magazine which would promote the LRC as an organisation.

Others...thought that even if the LRC could use a journal rather than just a much better website, the journal it needed wouldn't look much like Briefing. What was the point of taking over a magazine that needed a hefty subsidy, and which they couldn't afford to send to all their members, most of whom don't currently subscribe.

It came when the vote, there was an uneasy alliance between ultra-lefties like Ted Knight who are, in practice, acrimoniously and bitterly hostile to the LRC, and those who believe that Labour Party activity must take absolute priority.

Graham Bash sees it differently. He points to political differences between those within Briefing who look towards the PCP result which authorises the union, in principle, to support occasional election candidates, he writes: "Our judgment will be based on the individual candidates, their records and what they stand for. We already work very closely with MPs from Labour, the Lib Dems, the Green party..." That "pick-and-mix" approach - essentially identifi- cally to the policy of US unions to back "friends of labour" from whatever party - cuts across a drive for a coherent and distinct working-class presence in politics.

Anti-banker populism

The response to the latest banking scandal from Britain's biggest "revolutionary" group has been as uninspiring as it has been predictable.

Rather than making any clear political demands around the crisis, or taking the opportunity to argue for social control, the Socialist Workers' Party has opted for catch-cry populism and has made "jail the bankers" its slogan.

While the demand to bring people who are essentially corrupt thieves to some kind of justice (even bourgeois justice) has its place, the !configuration of one's response is dismal. In fact, "sub-populism" might be a bet- ter term, more people understand that the problem is not one of a few "rotten apple" bankers but a systemic issue, so for the SWP to respond merely by demanding that a few people are thrown in jail lags somewhat behind popular consciousness. It does the SWP no service to make a nebulous demand for expropriating the banks. It says: "We've had it, let's have a revolution and tear up the chums. The whole lot of them should be behind bars."

Understandable sentiments, but from a revolution- ary organisation - whose job it is to try and raise the political consciousness of the rest of the working class - one expects better.

By Daniel Randall

Reg Goodwin of Graham Bash, who had been a mainstay since its inception...

There are different views on why it has disappeared under the wing of the LRC. Some argue that the real cause was a falling out between personalities [in Briefing] which escalated and led to the withdrawal from its editorial board of Graham Bash, who had been a mainstay since its inception...

* This is an abridged reprint of a report on the Left Future Group which was published in Briefing, 27 July 2009. There has been a recent fall-out: Christine Shawcroft, a Labour Party National Executive Committee member and former vice-chair of the LRC and chair of Briefing, has resigned from the LRC.

Briefing was originally a split from Socialist Organiser, a founder of the SP, in the early 1980s. It was seen as a way of ensuring that there were Labour campaigns in the early 1980s that could contest the Tories or sideswipe by raising rates (property taxes). Despite that, over the years supporters of Solidarity have often sought, and sometimes achieved, collaboration with Briefing on issues where that's possible.

We opposed the merger because we saw it as a "double coup". On the magazine, it would cooperate-asthe hege- mony of those who were Labour-loyal but committed to a rather downbeat, "propagandist" course in the Labour Party, rather than the more interventionist, organise- ing conception represented by the LRC. In particular, the LRC and Briefing would - by default of the magazine's editors deciding the chief public profile of LRC members' month by month, and therefore the weak or bad character - established the hegemony of the same strand, against both the Briefing-minded and those around Ted Knight whom we do not think "ultra-left".

After such a close and acrimonious vote, and one where the majority may have depended on people who have had limits to it, and the convener of the AGM is open to some explanation of the motives of all. The structure of a Labour Briefing AGM is open to some argument and is calculated to not be able to attend, even if they are a member of some other faction. Those who argue independently point out that members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which produces the Weekly Worker, attended to support the LRC takeover... The CPC members didn't help their case by trying to obstruct the agenda. They said they had only come for the vote on the future of Briefing and didn't want to have to sit through it in a publication of government on the AGM.

The vote, everyone listened politely to a flimsy and incoherent speech from the working-class Labour Briefing, who abstained in the vote. There was applause but not much unity and we must wait to see how much comradeship remains.

Unfair to First International

By Daniel Randall

Also the long-term impact of the First International is understated. Veterans of that organisation in Britain were workers, to the early modern socialist movement of the 18th century.

The figures for 16-18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training - NEETs, as they are called, have risen over the previous year (8.1% now a fantastically poor opportunity for apportioning blame; if crime levels in particular area rise, find a correlation with NEET levels. If it is felt necessary to scrutinise the electorate by attack on teaching profession (with its strong level of union activism) then suggest that this is all the fault of education and dem- and support for imminent reforms.

The fact that one of these reforms started out as a return to a two-tier system (as examined in the last issue of Solidarity) only proves that the government has no real interest in supporting or encouraging young people, who do not think "ultra-left".

Furthermore, these figures beg an urgent question, if it's so crucial to ensure that young people remain in education, why remove EMA and therefore condemn the poorest and most vulnerable?

Young people need education and support; they have a right to both. School workers have already lost their jobs; they see it, not according to cynical criteria derived.

We must support them both by reminding the government of our solidarity, by proving that not everyone has written education off as nothing more important than a collection of bad statistics.

Dave Harris, Sheffield
The Southern Irish Press was unreservedly impressed. The article from Tony Parsons was "calm and rational" and "the beginning of something, too—when the raw wounds of the past can perhaps begin to heal". The Mountbatten exchanged a handshake with the woman whose armed forces murdered 14 innocent civil rights activists. There is a sense of "peace process" but this seemed to be more like 'applied politics'. It helped me to see how the trade union movement is part of something much bigger, and that dealing with problems on a local level can only get you so far. For real change to happen, a much bigger movement is necessary.

"I would encourage any aspiring activist to attend next year. I walked away with more knowledge, and insight than I had when I arrived, and that can only be a good thing. Solidarity wins!"

SOLIDARITY 7

Idea to change the world

Rendezvous in Northern Ireland?

A glance at the fiercest critics of this historic handshake is a reminder that things are more complicated. Before the meeting the Daily Mail advised the Queen to burn her gloves after carrying out her "distractful duty". The Sun's front page headline declared "We don't blame you for wearing gloves M'm'. The Times cartoonist providing an image of the Queen putting on four pairs of gloves before shaking the bloodstained hand of McGuinness. The idea that there might be plenty of blood on the monarch's hands too didn't occur to any of them.

The Daily Mail was the one paper that didn't deem the occasion to be worth a front page story. Inside, though, they brought us arch-militarist Max Hastings under the headline "I'm sorry, even in the name of peace, it was wrong to shake his blood-soaked hand!"

The working-class socialist response to this would seem to be fairly straightforward. McGuinness claims still to be a republican in both important senses of the word. As a "capital R" Republican he appeared to make peace with the highest symbol of British rule while her state and government continue to "occupy" the northern part of Ireland and deny his people self-determination. Even more objectionable is his apparent suspension of all his familiar anxieties into this short sentence: "If anyone doubted that the Good Friday Agreement was a humiliating defeat for me, let me tell you."

That view can be criticised as naive. It can be attacked as a top-down way of managing the communal differences without challenging the fundamental causes. In common with most elements of the "peace process" it seems to reinforce rather than undercut cultural division. It's a different matter, however, to criticise it for "going too far" towards the unionists. The least bad fault with modern-day SF is that they are insufficiently intransigent nationalists. Yet that is the criticism most commonly levelled at them from the left. And it's hard not to take some pleasure from the visible discomfort this event has caused to the British right. The fact that their Queen has felt it necessary to shake the hand of the former IRA commander has opened a very old sore for reactionaries.

The most reliable of these, Peter Hitchens, summed up the problem in the Mail on Sunday. After a few predictable and gratuitous personal swipes at McGuinness he compressed all his familiar anathemes into this short sentence: "If anyone doubted that the Good Friday Agreement was a humiliating surrender by a once-great country to a criminal gang, they can't doubt it now."

The sectarian divides of the '50s and '60s that had been claimed to be definitively closed, are re-emerging. But the Irish people haven't yet won a united independent state. The British have not surrendered and nor would it matter much if they did. The key to Irish territorial unity is, and has for decades, been democratic unity between the people. What Martin McGuinness did on 27 June offended the sensibilities of democrats and socialists because of our contempt for the institution of monarchy. However, his motive at least was progressive.

It was also republican in the sense defined by the founder of modern Irish republicanism Wolfe Tone — "to replace the name Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter with the common name Irishman". We should be bold enough to point that out.
**Greece**

**Greece: the simmering unrest**

Ed Maltby and Martin Thomas visited Thessaloniki and Athens between 4 and 9 July to find out more about what the Greek left is doing. This is their report.

To build too much on quick impressions is foolish. Not to formulate impressions is worse than foolish. It leaves us guided only by generalisations and summaries which reach us only after being filtered by others’ preconceptions.

Flexibility can lead to learning, by way of us formulating impressions and having them shown to be wrong (and why). Flat reliance on general formulas given in advance cannot.

That said, here are our impressions of a week in Thessaloniki and Athens talking and listening to people from many different strands of the Greek left and labour movement.

Greece is simmering. It is not boiling. It is not simmering down, either. New uprisings are likely, but in the autumn rather than the summer.

Syriza, the left coalition which soared from 4.5% in the 2009 election to 27% in the June 2012 poll, on a programme of reform, and smashed the Memorandum agreed by Greek governments with the EU, ECB, and IMF, and nationalising the banks under social and workers’ control, plans to convert from a coalition into a party, and has set itself the aim of building a mass membership linked to Popular Assemblies in neighbourhoods.

Syriza economist John Milios talked of a target of 200,000 members. Milios told us that the planned Popular Assemblies have already started, with 100 at a first local open-air meeting in Thessaloniki. Other activists were more sceptical about how fast Syriza can or will grow. The unions expect to stage a summer, when activity usually dips if only because of the heat.

One activist particularly sceptical of Syriiza, Mihalis Skouris of OKDE-Spartakos, opened his conversation with us by stating that the main thing is that, after the relative lull of the two election periods, all the organisations of the Greek left and radical left must get back on the streets. Now! Then he explained that, realistically, by “now”, he meant after the end of August.

**TRADE UNIONS**

We learned a bit about trade-union structure in Greece. In Greece, a “union”, or a “first-level union” anyway, is made up of workers in a particular firm or workplace or trade.

The Thessaloniki Trade Union Centre, for example, covers 250 “first level” unions, with a total of 100,000 members. The smallest of those unions has 22 members; the biggest, the local bus workers’, almost 3000.

The “first level” unions have sizeable autonomy. They can and do call strikes by assembling their members and having an on-the-spot vote. Workplace activists in Greece, unlike in Britain, do not have to go through a complex process of getting a remote national union leadership to run a postal ballot for a strike.

However, wider action depends on the higher “levels” of the union structure. There, things are not so good. The higher-level union offices and officials are (or have been) paid for by the government. They can and often do preside over dormant and neglected “first-level” unions. They can call one-day or two-day general strikes — sixteen of them so far — without serious follow-up and without serious organising in the workplaces.

Things are changing. Union posts come up for election every two or three years. Spinos, an activist with the Trotskyist group OKDE in Thessaloniki, told us: “Within the next six months or a year, the old Pasok officials will be voted out of the union leaderships. The biggest gainers can be the far left — more a broad spectrum of unaffiliated far left activists than the organised far-left groups.

“The unions you can’t really separate Syriza and the far left. They work together. Sometimes rank and file Syriza activists are more left-wing than rank-and-file activists of An-tarsya” [a coalition of ten revolutionary groups, which criticises Syrizas harshly as rightward-moving reformism].

Other activists put it more cautiously, but agreed that big changes in the union leaderships are probable.

The other twist here, which must tend to shake things up even apart from the union elections, is that for some months now the Greek government has stopped paying the trade-union centres’ bills and the union officials’ wages. The government says it will sort out some new arrangement sometime, but has not said when.

**LEFT POLITICS**

Some activists suggested to us that Greek society is still in a process of emerging from decades of demobilisation.

Giannis Vogiatzis, a long-standing activist of Xekinima in Thessaloniki, was very pleased with the large number of copies of its paper which his group had sold when Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras came to speak during the election campaign in Thessaloniki’s huge Aristotelous Square.

But, he noted ruefully, even then the square was not quite full, and Pasok and New Democracy had attempted no open election rallies at all in Thessaloniki. In the 1980s, he recalled, both Pasok and New Democracy election rallies would fill Aristotelous Square right from the sea front to the Venizelos statue.

Greece has probably as many different Trotskyist groups as Britain, and a swathe of other revolutionary groups more coloured by the tradition of the now diehard-Stalinist KKE (Communist Party of Greece).

Spinos from OKDE told us that all the currents of the revolutionary left have grown markedly in the crisis. “Nobody has doubled”, he cautioned. Some groups told us they had indeed doubled, or more.

In any case, the Greek revolutionary left is visibly more youthful and zestful than the British. The groups are smaller than they are in Britain, but they have a population one-fifth the size to draw from, and in proportion to population they are surely bigger.

We talked with many different groups. With OKDE, we ran up against stubborn political differences on attitudes to the European Union, on its call for a “Constituent Assembly”, and on attitudes to Syriza; but found their assessments of political life careful and thought-provoking, and their serious approach to work in trade unions and neighbourhood organisations undeniable. We found a group we knew very little about before we came to Greece, Kokkinia, instructive and lucid.

Time is needed for the revolutionary left as well as for the general processes of politicisation. More or less the whole revolutionary left has the broad idea that they can win large numbers of workers to revolutionary socialist organisation as the reformist leadership of Syriza is put to the test and found wanting. Some also point to a risk that if the revolutionary left cannot achieve that, then demobilisation which will follow the Syriza leadership being put to the test and doing badly will throw the political initiative into the hands of the far right.

Yet the revolutionary socialist left is divided by large differences: over attitudes to Syriza, over attitudes to the euro and the EU, etc. For it to surge forward, it will need to unify — or at least, some sizeable chunk of it will need to unify — around a political synthesis achieved through thrashing out those differences.

All discussions on political evolution in the Greek working class are in the shadow of the bulk of the KKE, which is Greece’s oldest political party and arguably also its most deeply-rooted. The KKE was down to 4.5% of the vote in June 2012 (from 7.5% in 2009, 8.2% in 2007). Stefanos from OKDE told us that despite the KKE’s revolutionary-ist direction, its life is in fact heavily focused on electoral success, and the electoral setback is grave.

KKE systematically organises its own demonstrations and rallies away from the main activities of the trade unions and the left, even on general strike days. When many thousands of young people come to events like the annual Anti-Racist Festivals in Thessaloniki (29 June / 1 July) and Athens (6/8 July), all the rest of the left are there, but absolutely not the KKE.

Andreas Kloke from OKDE-Spartakos told us that the KKE is “the most right-wing part of the movement, and also always trying to split the movement” — and this despite the fact that Spartakos is a member in good standing of the An-tarsya alliance, which in its official comment on the June election result deplored the fall in the KKE vote as “not a positive thing”, as indicative of the movement becoming less radical.

KKE stands like a large stone in the way of a flow by the Greek working class towards revolutionary socialist politics. Time will be needed, again, to wear that stone down suffi-
Protest against austerity sciently, or push it aside.

In May 1917, in the maelstrom of the Russian Revolution, Lenin struck his keynote as follows: "We Bolsheviks must patiently and perseveringly explain our views to the workers and peasants. Each of us must forget our old view of our work, each, without waiting for the arrival of an agitator, a propagandist, a more knowledgeable comrade who will explain everything — each of us must become all in one: agitator, propagandist and Party organiser. That is the only way we can get the people to... think over their experience and really take power into their own hands".

That politics in Greece may need a good run of "patiently explaining" does not mean that times are dim. However, the rise of the Golden Dawn neo-Nazism may limit the time for "patiently explaining". They got 7% of the vote in both the 2019 European elections and 2019 Greek legislative elections.

Assessments on the Greek left vary. Some say that the bulk of the Golden Dawn vote is atomised and incoherent protest, and social agitation and action will undercut it. The SEK (Trotskyist group linked to the SWP in Britain) calls for the Greek state to ban Golden Dawn, though the Syriza reformists we discussed with did not. Some anarchists resort to single combat with Golden Dawn over the heads of local communities. In any case, no coherent and united response by the left to Golden Dawn has emerged yet.

**APPEARANCES**

When we went to the Trade Union Centre in Thessaloniki, a water worker, Costas, not only answered our questions about water privatisation in Greece, but also asked us a question. Is Thessaloniki as we expected? One of us replies that what we have been told by many people indicates that there is great trouble and suffering behind closed doors, from unemployment and poverty. Yes, replies Costas. Things look "normal" in and near the city centre. But it is different further out. "People are sleeping in doorways, and sorting through garbage heaps to find something to eat. That didn't happen before".

Costas believes that the trade unions in other countries "must inform people that the problem with have in Greece is a problem will will have in every country. It is a system problem. When they are done with us, and with Spain and Italy, they will go on to others, maybe France.

"We have to change the rules where everything is privatised and everything goes to a few people".

Both Thessaloniki and Athens look at first sight as if they were built in a hurry, by erecting long rows of middle-rise concrete-box-buildings, from about the 1960s, and at the edges sometimes slapdash, though in the centres round patches of Roman, Byzantine, or classical ruins. In and near the city centres, there are some shuttered shops and cafes, and some beggars. But nothing dramatic. The remaining cafes have plenty of people sipping iced coffee through straws, playing backgammon, and chatting. Public transport works, rather better than in England. In the evenings, when cooler temperatures arrive, hundreds of young people sit and stroll round the White Tower in Thessaloniki, chatting and socialising rather than raging or rioting. Superficially, Greece today looks less like a country in the grip of crisis and acute decay than Thatcher's Britain or Volcker's and Reagan's USA did in the early 1980s.

There are political posters on the walls, but not a huge number. As in France, for example, graffiti on walls are more common than in England, but mostly not political. In a week we saw only one public street paper-seller or stall by the left, an ineffectual group of KKE youth trying to sell Rizopastis. The main papers of the left — Syriza's Avgi and Prinon, the KKE's Rizipartis, and Prinon (from the New Left Current, the biggest group in Antarsya) sell mainly through newspaper kiosks and newsagents. (Unlike in Britain, a law obliges the wholesalers to supply all papers above a certain print-run, without discrimination against the left). The cities do not look like Lisbon or Porto in 1974-6.

But to be suffering, outraged, thoughtful, rebel-minded, does not necessarily mean to parade the streets looking "abnormal", with a racket of rage always on your face, or ostentatiously in rags.

Yannis Varoufakis, Greece's best-known economist, says that now: "Greeks are in a catatonie state one moment, in a state of rage another". What looks "catatonic" to professor Varoufakis may be, in real life, people thinking things through.

- Many other reports from Greece will be posted as we type them up. at www.workerslib.org/greecejuly2012
By Theodora Polenta

On 3 July IMF chief Christine Lagarde said she was in “no mood for negotiations” over Greece’s enforced cuts programme.

The fighting strikes by Greek Steel and Phone Marketing workers show that Greek workers are in no mood for negotiation with the dictatorial capitalist power.

A general meeting of the Greek Steel workers, on 29 June, decided to invite the Federation of Metal Workers and all the Trade Union Centres of Attica [the region around Athens] to open up the struggle to the whole metal industry, with a 24-hour solidarity strike as the first step.

Dozens of workers’ associations and workers’ committees are present at the gates of Greek Steel these days, as a token of class solidarity.

Among them is the Workers Committee of the striking women of Phone Marketing. “Having as a banner the heroic struggle of the steel workers, we continue. We won’t surrender, we won’t retreat”.

On Thursday 5 July the steel workers voted unanimously to continue their strike. Their determination to carry on through any obstacles is something truly inspiring.

In Greece, working class success is the product of a special kind of solidarity. “We are able to bring a socialist society, our dream, step by step. Of course the first left government of Syriza will have a socialist programme”, Syriza’s prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, said.

What about the possibility of a violent retaliation by the police, if the strikes continue? “We believe we can bring a socialist society, our dream, step by step. Of course the first left government of Syriza will have a socialist programme”, Syriza’s prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, said.

The steel workers’ struggle, which has already established itself as a symbol for the working class, is continuing.

Greek Steel is owned by John Manessis, and is one of three firms that control steel production in Greece. The steelworkers’ picketline, taking advantage of a sloppy moment, has also captured the factory and attacked and injured three strikers, who were hospitalised. The employers and the scabs opened all the factory doors, hoping that would be the end of the strike.

Hundreds of people rushed into the Greek Steel factory to support the strike and remained until late at night. The 40 scabs were isolated and had to leave the building, bused and heckled.

By the afternoon the Greek Steel trade unionists had reoccupied their factory. Although all the wings of capitalist power were used — court ruling, police, scabs, security — the steel workers held a General Assembly and refused the argument by a ballot-box vote to continue the strike, 204 to 42.

A few days later, an Athens court ruled that the strike by tourbus drivers, due to take place the following day, was illegal. The drivers were set to strike in opposition to brutal cuts in their pay and benefits demanded by their employers in negotiations over a collective agreement. The Greek Steel scabs were discreetly assisted by the police that were there to “protect social peace”. They broke the steel workers’ picket line, taking advantage of a sloppy moment.

The strikers entered the factory and attacked and injured three strikers, who were hospitalised. The employers and the scabs opened all the factory doors, hoping that would be the end of the strike.

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A change in Greece will favour the fighting position of the working classes all over Europe

John Millios, a leading economist in Syriza and a Syriza member of the Greek parliament, spoke to Martín Thomas in Athens on 7 July 2012.

Q. We have approached a left Labour MP, John McDonnell. He has agreed to contact Jean-Luc Mélenchon to discuss initiating a European conference of the left to build solidarity with the Greek left. Our comrades in France have also asked Mélenchon directly. We think that the new government in Greece will be... A. Yes. They are planning to follow the same policy as before.

Q. And a left government in Greece could become a real possibility again quite soon... A. Yes. We hope so.

Q. There is a serious risk that the European Central Bank could retardate a left government in Greece and create an issue that Europe will have to stop the European Central Bank doing that... A. We think there is a concrete and practically zero probability. It’s not easy to exclude one country from the eurozone or from financing by the European Central Bank without forcing a very quick resolution of financial risk over the eurozone and double-digit interest rates not only for countries like Italy and Spain which already have problems but also for some countries. So the scenario is a threat and not really a practical possibility.

John Ackermann, the former head of Deutsche Bank, wrote recently that there has to be another big haircut of the Greek public debt, because the debt problem of the Greek economy is the central situation. The crisis started with the debt not being 120% of Greek GDP. They followed the austerity policies, they lowered the denominator of the debt-GDP ratio, and now we have public debt at 160% of GDP despite the haircut for private bondholders, so-called PSI.

This is not a situation where they can do anything they want. The European ruling classes have as a main target to restructure the economy and the society away from the so-called European model, the European social state, towards the Asian or Chinese type, with very low wages and with no rights and guarantees for the working classes. Wherever they can achieve is a matter of class and political forces.

Basis

It is not part of their plans to destroy the eurozone. That fact creates a basis on which we can negotiate.

We will say that the internal situation should be a matter for the Greek people—that is, the Greek government—and not the European Union. The European Union does not control the level of the minimum wage and on the collective-bargaining laws and on reforms of the tax system.

According to all accurate economic data, the actual direct tax coefficients in Greece are five to seven per cent of GDP lower than the European average. We have to change that. The rich must at last start paying taxes. We should not tax mass consumption, or the middle or the lower classes of society.

We should put this insoluble equation of the debt to other European countries, the members of the eurozone and the EEC and say that it is impossible, given the current situation, where we have the deepest recession since the Second World War, to achieve at the same three goals: to pay 110 billion euros in interest by the year 2020, to have a balanced budget and create a primary surplus [a surplus of government spending excluding debt-service]; and to have funds to create growth. It is impossible!

It is to the benefit of the European taxpaying classes to renegotiate the Greek debt. Our direction would be the way that the Federal Republic of Germany renegotiated its debt after the Second World War in 1932. The deal contained haircuts, renegotiation of the interest rates, and a moratorium period that made repayments conditional on growth—not would be paid when the economy started growing again.

This year it is estimated that in Greece we will have a negative economic expansion. Greece was growing faster than any other country in the eurozone with the exceptions of Ireland and Finland. The average growth rate in the last ten years was 1.5%. In eleven to twelve years we would have an increase in per capita GDP of 61%.

The debt, as a ratio to GDP, remained constant around 100%. That was due to tax exoneration, in part, and mainly to the reduction of tax coefficients for big capital and the rich.

Greek general strike, February 2012

The state revenues were reduced deliberately as GDP grew. That has to stop. It has to be reversed. We have to have a more just system and a redistribution of wealth in favour of the working classes.

Q. I agree that a Greek left government could be in a strong position to negotiate with the European Union. However, the leaders of the European Union are as dedicated to the idea of transforming the Greek economy as the Greek left is to transforming them in the opposite direction. The European ruling classes’ calculations will not just be financial. Even if the revaluation is counter-productive, financially, I can’t see how we can say there is zero probability that they will revalue.

A. I believe the revaluation would be not only counter-productive but also disastrous. Also, this is a fighting take place all over Europe—in all countries, even Britain, which is not a member of the eurozone. A change in Greece will favour the fighting position of the working classes all over Europe. We will have a changed situation.

Some governments which were elected on the basis of a different agenda, even in quotation marks—that is, a promise of a different agenda, despite what they actually do, like the French government—would be under strong pressure to decide on one side or the other.

We have discussed with different European governments, with the IMF, and the leadership of the European Union. Those have not been official meetings, but meetings through international institutions represented, in one way or another, those authorities. We are confident that we can negotiate.

Plan B

On the other hand, as we have seen from history, there are always mistakes or unexpected situations. We have to have a plan B.

And we have a plan B. But this plan B cannot be made public at this point, because it has to do with the whole architecture of the negotiation. I understand your question. The situation is severe, but it is not catastrophic; that is, there are alternatives.

We believe we have to go on to take part in this battle and to collaborate with left parties and trade unions all over Europe in order to change the situation. If things can be changed in Greece, that means they can change everywhere. If things have changed in Venezuela, that means things can also change in other countries.

Of course, it is a very strong confrontation. There are extremes on the side of the ruling elites. We have to be prepared for every possible outcome. But our main course is to continue on an internationalist agenda and fight with other left forces and movements all over Europe for a change over all the continent.

We don’t believe it would be a solution to have a situation like the interwar years where the working class of every country was making its alliance with its ruling class to fight other countries, and other countries were portrayed as the enemy. We do not believe that the enemy of the Greek people is Germany. We believe that the ruling classes of Germany follow a policy similar if not identical to that of the ruling classes of Greece. The ruling classes of Greece could not put forward their plans without the alliance of the German and other European ruling classes along with institutions like the IMF. They hope to make reactionary changes in this country and therefore of course they are not.

Q. If a left government in Greece wins office and succeeds, what would Greece look like after that? Would it still be capitalist? What are you aiming for?

A. If we sit here in Athens and look at the people passing by, we cannot understand the situation. The working classes of the country are on the brink of a great disaster. For the first time in post-war history, we have over 20,000 homeless. This is new for the country.

We have an official unemployment rate of around 20%, and 50% among the youth. This means an actual unemployment rate of around 30%, which is disastrous. This cannot go on.

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Anti-capitalist, pro-what?

By Martin Thomas

On 14 July activists meet for the first big public event of the “Anti-Capitalist Initiative” set up on 28 April and primarily initiated by a group of people who had just quit the WRP (Workers Revolutionary Party). Ambiguities in the initiative could be harmful. There is a risk of botching it so as to function well neither as a unified front nor as a broad forum, nor as a party-type organisation. Every activity in the working-class struggle, or for liberation, requires broad unity. If our aim is not just to fight immediate battles, but to replace capitalism altogether by a free, commoner working-class and other liberation struggles now. It must take the form of a network of united-front campaigns, rather than the strategy and tactics of formal political organisations. The question of what we call “left”-party and “right”-party organisations is of primary importance. What is the sense of fighting for the expropriation of the capitalist class and the replacement of market-based economy by a free, co-operative commons when an opposition party to the capitalist one will not be able to take power without the active support of a great number of people?

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The Second International’s lost revolution

In an ongoing series, Liam McNulty looks at the lives of some of the revolutionary socialist tradition’s heroes. This week, he explores the ideas and activism of Franz Mehring.

Franz Mehring (1846-1919) was a German Marxist journalist, theorist and historian. After almost thirty years in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) he opposed the leadership’s support for the First World War and founded the Spartacus League along with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

Mehring was a founder of the “World Socialist Daily” and became the editor of “The German Worker” (Der Deutsche Arbeiter). He was also a member of the SPD’s executive committee and played an important role in the party’s social democratic and Marxist development. Mehring was a major figure in the German socialist movement and played a significant role in the founding of the Second International.

Some antecedents of the protest emerged from the ashes of the First World War. One winter he chopped up his own furniture for firewood and distributed OPHR badges. Carlos laments in retrospect the failure to involve women athletes in the protest. Yet Wyoma Tjuu, who anchored the 4x100m women’s gold medal-winning quartet, still dedicated her quarter’s win to the two men in solidarity.

Beamon, whose massive long jump stayed in the record books for two decades, told Carlos after the protest that he had just screwed up his own life. Yet Beamon still wore long black socks when he collected his medal. George Foreman, winner of boxing gold, waved the stars and stripes after his victory, which was interpreted as a riposte to the protest. Yet years later, Foreman gave Carlos money when he was broke.

Saddled of all was Jesse Owens, whose four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics had answer to the heart of Hitler’s behemoths. Owens was sent by Brundage to perludeeatinagainstSmith and Carlos in the protest. He told them that there was no place in the athletic world for politics, as it to deny the very significance of his own past. Owens told them the black fist was “a meaningless symbol, when you have it, you have nothing but fingers”. This was a parody of the old socialist adage attributed to Daniel DeLeon, who roused workers by telling them things were weak fingers but as a collective they were powerful like a clenched fist. Smith and Carlos understood the significance of this gesture.

After the expulsion from the games, Carlos returned to the US and his life unravelled. He had to work as a security guard at a nightclub to earn a living. One winter he chopped up his own furniture for firewood. He played American football in the NFL and Canada until his legs were smashed so badly he walked with a permanent limp. It wrecked his relationship — his wife Kim committed suicide in 1977. He worked as a park keeper by the docks. It took more than a decade after his protest before he could truly work again doing things he really wanted to do.

Some antecedents of the protest emerge from John Carlos’ early life. He was born in 1945 and grew up in Harlem, New York. His father was a World War II veteran, a member of the African American army from WWI, who worked as a shoemaker, while his mother was a nurse on the night shift. He had to struggle first and foremost against the grinding poverty and vicious racism that imposed itself on every life situation. He had to fight dyslexia. His first love was swimming, but racism and poverty barred him from the pools to train. His early running victories were in heavy trainers and later in old, second-hand running spikes. Yet he protested at school about the food, and in his neighbourhood at the living conditions. Excluded from the 100m sprint in 1968, he still made the Olympic team for the 200m.

Ultimately, John Carlos’ life has been a triumph. He will be remembered long after other Olympic athletes are reduced to simply names in the record books. The causes for which they fought were commonplace today. They were not in 1968. They had to be fought for. John Carlos struggled. He overcame. He showed it was possible to change the world. John Carlos is an inspiration.

The black-gloved salute from the podium at the Mexico City 1968 Olympics was one of the most riveting images in the history of protest, surpassing its sporting moment. This autobiography of one of the central protagonists illuminates why John Carlos deserves to be regarded as a hero and a true champion.

John Carlos came third in the 1968 Olympic 200 metre final. His US compatriot Tommie Smith came first and broke the world record. Carlos was just piped by the Australian Peter Norman. For the medal ceremony, the two Americans wore long black socks and no shoes to protest black poverty. They wore beads around their necks to protest racial injustice. Their gloves signified black power, strength and unity.

For their courage, Smith and Carlos were booted out of the stadium and expelled from the Olympic village. Contrary to the myth, they were not stripped of their medals, but they returned to the US reviled and denounced, dubbed “black-skinned storm-troopers” who’d given a “Nazi salute”.

Carlos grew up in Harlem, New York, and learned his politics from Malcom X. Malcom “articulated ideas we had but didn’t have the vocabulary to express. He turned frustrations into logic”. Carlos considered himself a follower of the socialist Ferdinand Lasalle, but was not a socialist. But his instinct was political and democratic, which led him to protest openly against the Prussian annexation of Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871.

During the next two decades, Mehring worked at a number of liberal newspapers, becoming a well-known parliamentary reporter for the Social Democracy. By 1895 he considered himself a follower of the socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, but it took until 1906 for him to shift his political allegiance with his own class. This came when, as editor of the democratic Berliner Volkszeitung, he made student attacks on Otto von Bismarck’s Anti-Socialist Laws and the German Chancellor
At its 2012 policy conference, the Unite union rati-fied a strategy from its Executive for changing the basis on which the union relates to the Labour Party. Dave Quayle, Chair of Unite’s National Political Committee, spoke to Solidar-ity about what this strategy means for working-class political repre-sentation.

The consensus in the union was very much that if we were going to reengage with the Labour Party, the rela-tionship had to change. We gave millions of pounds to a party we have little confidence in, and we get nothing back. The Labour Party in govern-ment did absolutely nothing for the collective rights of workers, and very little for our individual rights.

So we had two options — disaffiliate, or campaign to change the way the rela-tionship between the union and the party worked. Len McCluskey made that a key part of his election campaign, so the strategy is something that’s been in development since he got elected.

Many people across the union had an input into it, and it was passed by our Executive last December. It’s all been entirely public; the strategy document is in the public domain, and we’ve conducted the argu-ments for it out in the open. This isn’t a secret coup — we’re not Progress.

SHIFT

We want to change the rela-tionship between the unions and the party from being money based. We want to see trade unionists involved at every level of the party. We want a network of Unite councillors and MPs, as well as councillors and MPs from other unions. Only 9% of sitting Labour MPs have a working-class background; that’s got to change.

None of this will be easy because the way New Labour changed the party’s structures, we want to fight on that front too. A key part of our strat-egy is to democratise Labour Party conference and make it resolution-based, or at least to allow minority positions from the National Policy Forum.

The key policies we want to see trade union ac-tivists within the Labour Party fight for at every level are quite simple. It’s about giving workers the right to collectively struggle to change their condi-tions. We want to shift the balance in the party away from middle-class academ-ics and professionals to-wards people who’ve actually represented workers and fought the boss. At the parliamentary level the key fight is against the anti-trade-union laws. We have to restore the right to take solidarity action and strike effective-ly.

There’s a lot of support for our strategies within party members, as well as from some activists within the union. Everyone getting this policy into action.

The leadership needs to take the membership with us and show people it can work. We have a job of work to do in that respect.

CONFERENCE

Fighting for a demo-cratic party conference with no_BY STEWART WARDバルフ・ボーテイエクレクラ -c Lisbon aga -inst bosses after the strike ended.

Balfour Beatty electricians won a swift victory against bosses after they took wildcat strike action on a site in Scotland.

The workers, who are in-stalling an overhead elec-tricity transmission line on the A90, accepted the union’s offer to restore the right to take strike action. They voted for the proposal, and the union accepted them.

The union’s offer to restore the right to take strike action was accepted by EMT members. The union had already made the offer to EMT members.

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REPORTS

Sheffield strikers discuss workers control

By Rosie Huzzard and Dan Higginbotham

Recycling workers and their supporters in Sheffield on Tuesday 5 July to discuss the status of their dispute, after workers suspended their indefinite strike action on Wednesday 4 July.

Scab labour and strikebreakers were employed during the strike. Whilst no-one was willing to speak on the record about this, there was an allegation that SOVA, the private company which runs the recycling centres for the council, made use of its charity division which works with ex-prisoners.

Some of these may have been used as ex-scabs, with the suggestion that their normal positions were under threat if they didn’t comply, as this represents a horrific act of exploitation on behalf of a so-called charity.

The workers’ demands were for the reinstatement of dismissed staff, an end to reduced opening hours of recycling depots (and consequent reduction in salary), improved bonus payments, and paid increases.

A report from the GMB union reported that staff have now been reinstated, opening hours have been set at 22.5 hours a week for each worker, and bonus system has been agreed with workers. However, this centres on productivity bonuses, which only equal an extra €2 per hour on top of minimum wage.

Despite these impressive victories, GMB members still felt that the changes represented a betrayal of public services.

They will now face an increased workload to meet targets which they feel will reduce the standard of service they offer to the users.

The other offer from management under the talks was rather different and politically very interesting. The workers were offered management of the green waste recycling scheme under their own control, in which union reps described as “workers co-op”. It seems the “green waste” (garden waste) has proved to be a bit of a problem for SOVA, who charge the householder per bag of collected waste.

Unsurprisingly, people prefer to dump their waste in the regular household bins, but this, problematically, tended to bring them over the weight limit for workers and into health and safety problems.

MANAGEMENT

The green waste collection contracts currently cost £300,000, and the workers estimate that £20,000 of that is spent on management costs.

If the offer comes to fruition (though the workers seem very cautious of it, and with good reason), their initial thoughts seem to be to run it not as a coop in the traditional sense, but as a democratically-run service under workers’ control, doing away with all management and instead simply employing a financial advisor to manage the accounts.

This is a potentially huge victory for the workers, who made clear that they plan to plough all £300,000 back into wages or the service. If the service is taken back in house, workers will insist that the scheme’s profits should be ringfenced for investment in care, housing, and other social services.

It is an inspirational example of class solidarity, and clearly shows a group of workers thinking about how workers’ control — rather than volunteer-based cooperative models or outsourcing — can be used to beat cuts and defend services.

It is important to remember that this is a suspension, and not a settlement. The SOVA strikers will now take stock and considering their next steps.

Union reps said that we should throw all thoughts of a coup one or two-day strike outside of the window as they are useless. They also said that having a strike fund, especially for those workers without any support from family or partners, was essential.

They said finally that if they could launch indefinite strike action to take on bosses’ cuts, anyone can.

Bus bosses’ bid for peace

By Darren Bedford

London bus workers’ union Unite suspended an indefinite strike on Thursday 5 July after an offer from management appeared to meet the pre-strike demand for £500-an-acrossthe-board bonus for Olympic workers.

Transport for London officials trailed the offer in the press as being the equivalent of £200 per worker, or £700 for workers at garages more heavily impacted by the Games. They also talked up a unique profit-sharing scheme, where they promised them a share of the extra revenue the bus operating companies, if they were guaranteed to plough it onto staff.

That bosses have made this offer at all after — at least a year’s worth of negotiation — further drivers’ hard work is hugely significant, and a testament to both the power of workers’ action and the desperation of London’s transport bosses and politicians to avoid any disruption to the Olympic Games.

There must now be no full and democratic a debate as possible amongst bus workers about the deal. It has some hidden (or at least hard-to-spot) strings — for example the fact that TFL’s figures (the CR68 figure, for instance) are before-tax figures, meaning the actual amount workers receive could be a lot less. Some bus worker activists believe calling off the 5 July strike was a mistake, while others feel that it would have been poorly supported once the details of the offer became clear.

As Solidarity goes to press, the next strike — scheduled for 24 July — is still live, although Unite representatives discuss the full details of the offer (currently still not available to the industrial) that strike may also be suspended or called off.

Settling for the bosses’ current offer — even if they had from them when previously they had been unwilling to make one at all — would be a victory.

Bus worker activists must assess whether the strength and democratically solidified inside which is the best victory they can hope for, or whether they are capable of fighting for an even bigger one.

Tube cleaners frozen out of Olympic bonuses

By Ollie Moore

While many transport workers will now be receiving payments for the extra workload they will face during the Olympics, some are being frozen out — and, not surprisingly, many are those who are already overworked and super-exploited.

Workers on both contracts — ISS and Initial on London Underground, and Carlisle on the Docklands Light Railway — are not getting an RMT ballot for industrial action.

ISS and Initial are refusing to pay even the barely-adequate London Living Wage. The ballots close on Thursday 19 July, the same day that the union will also declare ballot results on the London Cycle Hire Scheme. South West Trains, First Great Western and Greater Anglia.

RMT Transport workers for London staff struck for one day starting on the evening of Sunday 1 July. TFL has offered no Olympic payment to many of its staff, expecting them to carry the extra workload with no reward. Despite all TUL’s unions stating that they are capable of taking any action short of strikes — if the service is so badly run as to warrant that — the RMT is baulking members for “action short of strikes”, planning to boycott this policy and keep stations open.

Lianne’Brien, London Transport workers’ representative on RMT’s national executive, told Solidarity, “Everyone is entitled to some extra cash for the extra workload during the Olympics, but there is a bigger issue — employers using the Olympics as a pretext to try casualised forms of working, so they can then impose them after the Games when they set out cutting jobs.

"It is essential that the unions take a stand against this.”

Essex firefighters strike

By Bill Holmes

Firefighters in Essex have been on strike in a long-running dispute over cuts and crewing arrangements.

Members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) staged an eight-hour strike on Sunday 18 July, and followed it up with a one-hour stoppage on Saturday 30th.

Workers have been campaigning against the Essex Fire Authority since August 2009.

The fire authority has stockpiled equipment, locked out union members out of fire stations on the day of industrial action. Keith Hanscombe, East Anglian spokesman for the FBU, said the ball-out had been solid.

He said: “We are very pleased the fire chiefs decided to abandon plans to stop pay for the whole 15-hour night shift and lock out. We’d asked that it would have affected the Olympic torch relay. There are 160 fewer frontline firefighters in Essex and it’s getting worse. They are getting away with the same number of people working, but with fewer firefighters so they have to do the work the way we do things — our dispute over cuts and working conditions are directly linked.”

Talks between the union and fire chiefs are continuing through the government conciliation service ACAS prior to the next planned action, a 24-hour stoppage on July 18. Initial strike dates have already been set for August and October.

Mr Hanscombe added: “The Essex Fire Authority has more than £12 million in reserves, 15% of its annual budget. We have recommended a 5% pay rise. Pickles has told councils to push front-line cuts with recommendations in the Brentwood constituency the second full-time fire crew is being cut.”
Whose Olympics?

By Dan Rawnsley

The London Olympics will begin in just under three weeks, but the accompanying security measures and marks of privilege in the city have been visible for some time.

Be it the 17.5km electric fence around the Stratford site, the warnings about travel delays, or markings appearing to identify specific roads for Olympic traffic only during the event, one thing is clear — the Games have come to town.

Activist groups covering a range of issues have come together to form the Counter Olympics Network (CON), stating in a press release that “CON helps to provide a co-ordinated and free voice for a wide range of groups which share the desire to provide a counterbalance to the overblown mainstream pro-Olympics propaganda. CON is also concerned that the Olympic games will be used as a hub for a range of events and protests around the Olympic summer.”

These events include protests around the Games, the planned demonstration on 28 July and information on Simon Moore, who has been placed under an ASBO with the purpose of preventing “conduit leading to the disruption of the Olympic Games.” Simon, who was involved in a peaceful protest in the Lea Valley Regional Park, argued that “the effect of this ASBO is to criminalise peaceful protest.”

CORPORATE

“There are legitimate issues for concern around the Olympics such as the destruction of Leyton Marsh in East London for a temporary basketball training facility and the ethics and human rights records of corporate sponsors for the games.”

Hopefully, during the event, CON will continue to document useful information on similar acts by the state which suppress the right to protest. A lot of the security measures being put in place are extreme, bizarre, and in some cases dangerous, for example the case of anti-aircraft missiles being put in housing estates. Exactly what would happen if a plane were shot down over East London doesn’t make a lot of imagination.

Other measures include an integrated CCTV system capable of tracking an individual across the city and the use of security-camera equipped drone aircraft. It is not merely a matter for “activists.” The heavy handed security measures will impact on individuals going about their every-day lives, whether it’s young people being stopped and searched, or workers having to calculate in a few extra hours to their journey time to and from work.

Demonstrate against austerity


Setsbacks for Islamists in Libya’s elections

By Martyn Hudson

The results of Libya’s first parliamentary elections since the fall of Gaddafi’s regime indicate a victory for the National Forces Alliance (NFA) led by former interim prime minister Mah- moud Jibril.

The NFA is a loose conglomeration of parties (58 of them) centred around a liberal programme of economic transformation and political moderation, and is largely a product of the old National Transitional Council (NTC).

The heartland of the NTC was the original liberal enclaves of Benghaz and Cyrenaica, which makes it all the more surprising that hostility to the elections was most apparent in those areas rather than the milita ridden west and south where there have been ongoing tensions.

The electoral disruption, far from being orchestrated by remnants of Gaddafi’s regime, have been a product of increasing federalist interventions specifically in the east of the country where there have been long approaches towards Libyan and monarchical and secessionist rules and where federalist and secessionist groups have some currency.

Qaddafist supporters have had the election, though in some cases dangerous, for example the case of anti-aircraft missiles being put in housing estates. Exactly what would happen if a plane were shot down over East London doesn’t make a lot of imagination.

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The Counter Olympics Network will act as a valuable hub of information for a variety of similar issues around the Games.

No limos, no logos, no launching!

Demonstrate on Saturday 28 July. Assemble 12 noon, Mile End Park. March to Victoria Park for “People’s Games” event.

More info: counterolympicsevenetnetwork.wordpress.com