Government and bosses smear railworkers and plan union-busting

The results of privatisation: seven people were killed at the Potters Bar derailment in May 2002. This month Network Rail was fined £3 million for neglect of the railway infrastructure.

Government advisor Roy McNulty wants railworkers to pay for new rail investment by cutting wages and conditions.
By Vicki Morris

Justice Secretary Ken Clarke’s stupid words about rape were seized on by the right-wing media to bash the Government’s Green Paper “Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders”.

The underlying message of the Green Paper is that prison is not the most cost-effective way to protect the public from crime. The Green Paper wants fewer people in prison — though not necessarily fewer prisoners — fewer short sentences, more “community punishment”, more people working or being helped while they are in prison.

Newspapers such as the Sun and Daily Express reflect the idea that “prison doesn’t work”, which is Clarke’s tune. Conservative Douglas Hurd was the first politician to dare to suggest this back in 1991. By 1993, Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard was insisting again that “prison works”, responding in part to the right-wing media.

The Prison Service is also under pressure, along with all other areas of government, to make cuts. Here as well as elsewhere in the public services, the Tories figure that letting the private sector in on the act will save money: companies such as Serco and Group 4 will get a bigger role and more chance to make profits from imprisonment.

On the rape issue, Clarke’s words, suggesting that rape, for example, is “proper” or “classic”, rape, reflect the fact that the length of a rape sentence depends on the extent to which the amount of violence the perpetrator uses in the attack and where there, it’s just that Clarke

Sofie Buckland

Counterfire have published an article by Lindsey German arguing what it says about the French “left” (or, rather, Parti Socialiste) government with the reputation of Dominique Strauss-Kahn might be considered an acceptable Presidential candidate. It’s perfectly valid to discuss what the emerging picture of Strauss-Kahn’s behaviour tells us about the French political system and the sweeping under of vile sexist behaviour towards women that in case it damages the cause. Funny, then, that German is unable to make the link between the attack on Julian Assange” meet, particularly the one where you Benn makes light of rape, suggesting violence is a necessary component for a crime to have taken place.

Hiding behind the excuse of Julian Assange “seeks just seconds after retaliating her feminist credentials, the case, she, says, is “about what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”.

Rather than feeling out a few al-clear statement of utter contempt for Assange’s alleged victims here? They’re not sure what happened, but do nothing. Unlike the Strauss-Kahn case, Assange is not a victim. As a result, this is the kind of article that can’t be answered by sober analysis. German may well have missed the boat on a generally pathetic attempt at feminist analysis, displaying all her feminist credentials, the case, she, says, is “about what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”. German pops up on another, with a too-curling embarrassing attack against the last time the attacks on Assange are what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it’s about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited”.

UKIP and PS are a centre-left party, not a social democratic government to reign in the excesses of consumer culture. It’s just so insufficient, as if when coming out a sexotics of popular feminist, chucking in a few anti-capitalist stock phrases and name-checking some bad guys makes up for fail- ing to stick to socialist feminist principles when it actually matters. Matters when it’s difficult.

On Assange and German could be round, that’s because the conspiracy is behind his arrest? Not re- ally. You couldn’t slide a cigarette paper trail through their responses. German is on the side of taking rape seriously here because Strauss-Kahn heads the IMF and PN are a centre-left party, not America-kicking, conspiracy-busting internet cowboys.

LEFT AND FEMINISM

The hypocrisy here is just another sad indication of the state of the British left when it comes to feminism. This desire exists for many reasons. Justice is not about coming out a sexotics of popular feminist, chucking in a few anti-capitalist stock phrases and name-checking some bad guys makes up for fail- ing to stick to socialist feminist principles when it actually matters. Matters when it’s difficult.

Clarke, rape and society

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Students face fees of £9,000 at the big conference, to be supported by the UK government’s Secretary Jim Murphy and the government’s Secretary for Education, David Willetts.

The NCAFC has been largely positive, bringing together student anti-cuts groups and activists from across the country and helping to galvanise mass action. During the student action of last winter, the campaign gained widespread support and recognition.

For some time, however, the NCAFC has been hampered by its simple structure of democratic structures. The loose, informal regional activist meetings which had taken decisions up until the end of 2010, with the London meeting to some extent doubling as a national decision-making body, became less adequate as the pace of struggle rose. For instance: the call for the January 29 demonstration in London and Manchester, eventually attended by 10,000 and 6,000 students, was made by a London NCAFC meeting called at a few days notice, and attended by less than a dozen people, the majority members of far left groups. The lack of an adequate decision-making structure resulted in a number of easily avoidable disputes. The campaign missed several opportunities to call a national conference during the heat of the struggle. At the January conference, those attending were almost exclusively students, the majority being female.

One result was that many agreed campaigning priorities fell by the wayside. Everything continued to be dominated by small groups of people able to attend central London meetings and boycott dominated by members of left groups. Without a national co-ordinating body to function as a central core, regional groups did not get tied down. Eventually London meetings become less frequent as well. The NCAFC is still capable of pulling up impressive active intervention in NUS conference, the campaign for a national demonstration, solidarity with the London Met anti cuts struggle, but these happen as spurts rather than part of an ongoing, consistent, planned campaign.

This despite the continued existence of dozens of campus anti-cuts groups which broadly support the campaign but, by and large, have little idea what it’s doing. The 4 June conference should establish a national committee to do the following:

- Facilitate national co-ordination between anti-cuts groups;
- Facilitate regional co-ordination by ensuring that regions meetings act; actually happen;
- Ensure that NCAFC supporters are kept informed of what the campaign is doing;
- Ensure clear, accountable channels for those taking action in the name of the campaign.

We would propose a simple structure of ten/twelve/fourteen people elected by the 4 June conference, to be supplemented by delegates from any organisations which want to affiliate. This committee could make people within its ranks responsible for duties such as treasurer.

Any structures established at this conference should not be set in stone. The tide of student activism has not ebbed, but it has left a rich sediment behind, with many local anti cuts groups and student activists than before. This movement will most likely revive in the new year and it needs a strong, democratic national coordination.

We should take this opportunity to make NCAFC 4 to play that role.

Syrian revolt holds up against the odds

By Colín Foster

Against all the odds, fierce repression by Syria’s police state has not yet quelled street protest there. Yvonne Ridley, a US expert on Syria, wrote on 21 May: “Syrian government official Theodore Friedmann boasted that the revolution was ended with the ‘bloodshed of 9 May’.”

The Syrian government is that “the US, Israel, the satellite political and military bases, the radical [Islamist] cleric Yassuf al-Qardawi and others are part of some unholy alliance to bring down Syria.”

The writer quotes a Syrian dissident as telling him that very few people believe this stuff “because they want it, because they’re afraid.”

The regime still has some political and military backing, and the army mostly stays loyal. According to all reports, the opposition is losing ground to the Qaddafiists, who consider the Qaddafi regime to be the “most likely revive in the new year and it needs a strong, democratic national coordination.”

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We should take this opportunity to make NCAFC 4 to play that role.
**Syria: the dog that didn’t bark**

**Eric Lee**

As I write these words, news has come in of the failure of Syria’s opposition to hold a general strike.

One is reminded of Sherlock Holmes’ comment about the case where “the dog did nothing in the night-time.” Holmes famously responded, “That was the curious incident.”

It is certainly a curious incident in the context of recent representations in repres- sive societies to issue a call for a general strike.

What is unusual is that the Syria call — reported on Facebook — got an instant statement out of the Brussels-based International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) expressing its strong support.

And then nothing happened. The general strike fizzled out.

What appears to be going on is that trade unionists, de- mograts, and human rights activists around the world are eager to believe the “Arab Spring” is over.

We all desperately want to see Qaddafi finally ousted, and then we’re long to see the end of the war. And more than anything, we long to see the end of the US military occupation.

For example, strikes were common. You didn’t have to be an expert to see change coming. Organisations were being formed — the real estate tax collectors, the trade unions, were common. You didn’t have to be an expert to see change coming.

Syria had a real trade union movement (the UGT), one with limited independence but real enough to be able to break from the regime at the right moment.

But Syria and Libya are not like that at all. We’ve heard little about independent workers organisations there in recent years.

Without something like the CTUWS and its years of experience with building independent workers organisations, it will be much harder to organise strikes — let alone a general strike — in a country like Syria.

That’s why if one looks for a country where workers might actually stage mass strikes, independent unions and topple a regime, one needs to look to Iran.

Iran is in some ways like Egypt was a few years ago. There is a strong and militant workers’ movement, independent of the regime. It has staged large-scale strikes, most notably shutting down Tehran’s public transport system.

Iran is regime has reacted with severe brutality, hunting down union leaders and jailing them. Trade union activists have been flogged and murdered. But the resistance continues.

General strikes are not usually successful when called by well-meaning activists on Facebook — not unless there is a basis in the real world, in the working class, of independent organisations. We had that in Egypt, but didn’t have it in Syria.

That’s the reason why Mubarak faced spending the rest of his life in jail, while Assad remains in power.

**What didn’t happen in Syria this week — the dog that didn’t bark in the night-time — has much to teach us about how popular uprisings take place, and what needs to be done to make them succeed.**

**Barry Finger**

Are the prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian peace any more imminent after President Obama’s recent speech?

**Barry Finger**

The short answer would be no. Not because American imperial interests would not be better served by a two state so- lution. Brokering such a deal would enormously enhance America’s prestige and credibility with an awakening Arab street, a public justifiably suspicious of Western intentions given imperialism’s history of sustaining their oppressors.

The world of imperial puppetry, where elite interests are manipulated through authoritarian surrogates — the house of Saud, the Mubarak and Ben Ali — is drawing to a close. This is no mystery to Obama. The real problem is that despite the two state solution being the overwhelming consensus among US policy makers and its citizenry, there is no energised constituency for this within the American elector- ate.

Rarely do Americans concern themselves with foreign pol- icy issues, and when they do, not until it hits their streets, unless these issues entail questions of large scale and prolonged commitment of American ground forces.

And to the extent that there is a vocal element willing to raise campaign money and weigh in on this conflict, these voices belong to the Christian right, and to those antiwar sects of the Jewish community who are either generally con- servative or progressive in all matters save Israel. In other words, America’s bourgeoisie is so heavily invested in any American politi- cian willing to stake ground anywhere on the Israel-Pales- tinian conflict to the left of Lapid or for any left-wing Israeli politician looking for a permanent engagement.

American initiatives with the Netanyahu government have not proven capable of addressing the root causes and sources of domestic humiliation and loss of credibility for Obama.

Every time Israel has been asked to make a show of good faith by returning to the negotiating table, the Israelis have coupled their begrudging return with enhanced settlement activity. Even the US’s special envoy, George Mitchell, a veteran negotiator in the Northern Ireland conflict, resigned in frustration with the lack of seriousness on the part of Israel to move beyond its imperious comfort zone, a status quo where they have the upper hand, and seek a permanent solu- tion that also accommodates legitimate Palestinian aspira- tions.

Netanyahu’s green light for the concert of nations’ initiative was entirely predictable.

But the Palestinians forced Obama’s hand, first by Hamas reconciling with the Palestinian Authority and then by their threat to seek international recognition by bringing the issue of self-determination to a UN vote this autumn. And Obama couldn’t afford to be caught out playing into the right’s game, foolishly describing the Palestinian strategy as an attempt to “dis- legitimise” Israel. Sitting this out and letting Netanyahu squirm as September approached would have been a fitting answer to Israeli obfuscation.

But letting Israel pikkle in its own isolation would also have opened the administration to the charge of “weakening if not outright betrayal by Lapid’s echo chamber on the American right. Obama simply lacks the political chops to resist these charges, as do most American politicians.

**1967 BORDERS**

Obama’s speech reflects all these failings. He outlined a peace based on the 1967 borders with mutually agreed land swaps. The Oslo accords pay lip service to the idea of a “self-governed” Palestinian state, which can only be established after the withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied Palestinian territories (including East Jerusalem) and the gaza strip. While the peace talks in Cairo were both symbolic and real, they were ultimately failed. It is the point of no return. It is the point of no return.

Obama’s call for Palestinian self-determination within a contiguous state is certainly a step beyond these accords. But otherwise his proposals are a restatement of the official po- sition of the United States for the past two decades, includ- ing the exclusion of any commitment on the future of Jerusalem as a shared capital.

Moreover, Obama’s characterisation of Israel not as a Jew- ish homeland, but as a Jewish state, is detrimental to the in- terests of the Jews. The point is not just that Israel, a state which is shamelessly relegated to second-class citizenship by that un- derstanding. This anti-democratic formulation thoughtlessly discards the potential role that these communities, if fully inte- grated, could otherwise play as a bridge to reconciliation between Israel and the wider world.

A serious peace offensive on Obama’s part would necessi- tate confronting Israeli and Palestinian leaders with a de- mand for an immediate and lasting freeze. This is not a matter of imposing a peace, but of ignoring the democratic yearn- ings and imaginations that both peoples share for a nor- malisation of a free of war and the threat of war. It would require Obama to appeal over the heads of the entrenched and intransigent leaders of Israel (and their American pa- trons) and sell this vision directly to people of Israel and Palestine. That would have dispelled Netanyahu’s claim that giving up the West Bank settlements will endanger Israel’s security, while deflecting Palestinian irredentism, which feeds on continued Israeli oppression without realistic prospect for a just and lasting peace.

It would also entail standing up to housemaw reac- tion. The one thing Israel does not want is a new freeze, as this administra- tion, whose progressive bark is invariably belied by its toothless bite.

**Organising in retail**

The company set up a “working group” system to “con- sult” with their staff about the changes. These working groups were badly advertised and attended only by floor managers who were disconnected from, and dis- liked by, ordinary staff. The serious attack on conditions af- fected others far more than me. Young mums, who already paid significant amounts to even get to work, had their pay cut. Most were already living in hostels and insecure ac- commodation.

I joined the GMB whilst these changes were taking place, but they didn’t help where help was desperately needed. The union could have done more.

Throughout my time at Superdrug staff were discon- tented, always discussing the (awful) behaviour of our management. There was a palpable anger at how staff were being treated, even before the restructuring, about shift pat- terns and pay.

I managed to get three other members of staff to join the GMB, which provided much needed informal meetings in the pub about how to best organise. This began to escalate some- what when a strike was held by Superdrug staff in the Mid-lands as they were on a one day’s strike with the rest of the workforce not on strike as they were unwilling to take action. Continued activity became in- creasingly difficult as I had to attend university.

Retail has been historically viewed as difficult to unionise for a number of reasons. From my experience, the lack of potential for unions to recruit and, more importantly, organise and radicalise mem- ber in retail. But it will take a lot of hard work.

* More in this series: tinyurl.com/mylifeatwork

**My Life at Work**

**By Curtis Deane**

Until recently I worked as a shop assistant at Super- drug in Egham, Surrey. I’m at university so can’t work as much as I need to, and I’ve spent quite a lot of time with family.

Egham is a small town and the shop is even smaller. The pay, even in comparison to other high street shops, is dire, a few pence above the minimum wage. The conditions are not much better, a tiny, unequipped tea room with nowhere to store belongings.

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EDITORIAL

Renationalise the railways!

After seventeen years of rail privatisation, and wave upon wave of attack on railworkers' conditions, the Government has suddenly declared that railworkers are fea- therbed.

Welcoming the McNulty report, published on 19 May, it has signalled an assault on railworkers' pay and conditions, with the threat of new anti-strike laws to hand if the unions resist.

The truth is not that railworkers have been living in a visibly unremarked pocket of luxury. The Government is spending a lot of money on rail in a time of financial difficulty for the state. Big investment projects like Crossrail and the Birmingham high-speed link, when they come on stream, will give railworkers great potential industrial power. So will the Olympics. The Government wants to crush railworkers' union strength before that happens.

Sir Roy McNulty, author of the report, writes that the rail industry must earn its "licence to grow". He means that projects like Crossrail and HS2 (the high-speed link between Birmingham and London) must be funded by savings from existing rail budgets.

A large part of those cuts from existing budgets, using the most realistic of the report's scenarios, is to come from reduced staff costs (£260 million out of £740 million by 2018/9).

In particular, the report recommends that driver-only operation should become the "default" for train services. In other words, it recommends making almost all train guards redundant.

The unions must respond immediately and in a forthright manner. The Government will try to ride out the political flak that large-scale national rail strikes will cause. We have to ensure that they can't.

The McNulty report was commissioned by the previous Labour government. It is a ten-year plan for making rail- workers pay for the modernisation of the railway and the failures of privatisation, which has led to a government sub- sidy for private rail operators of £5 billion a year compared to the £1 billion a year paid to the old nationalised British Rail.

The report expresses concern about the fragmentation of the railways. Phrases like "whole-system approach", "sys- tem-wide", and "seamless approach" litter the document.

The obvious way to get an integrated railway is renationalisation. McNulty dismisses it. He says he "has no politi- cal or ideological view", but laments the "enormous costs that could be involved in renationalisation".

That indicates ideological blindness. Why couldn't the franchises be allowed to expire, and pass back to public ownership, costing nothing? And as it is, the Government already owns Network Rail.

As the rail expert Christian Wolmar, writing for the rail union TSSA, puts it, McNulty "did not draw the obvious conclusion that renationalisation and fragmentation are at the root cause of the industry's overspending...

\[\text{\textit{"McNulty has allowed himself to be constrained by the same old neo-liberal agenda: private sector is best, state is inefficient and so on. The biggest mone... is that Britain's railways are less efficient than their state run neighbours"}}\]

Railworkers want, not just a technically-efficient state-run system, but a railway which works as part of an integrated public transport system, run by workers' control, ecologi- cally sound, and serving the needs of the majority rather than primarily of the commuter ticket-purchasing people.

Renationalisation is the first step. But, decrying the bu- reaucratic inefficicency of the old nationalised British Rail, McNulty recommends more bureaucracy through the cre- ation of national bodies to achieve network integration.

He engages in dishonesty on employer relations. He ad- mits that his report's "recommendations would inevitably lead to significant changes for the people in the rail indus- try", but blandly comments: "Improved employee relations will make the industry better able to handle the significant changes".

Pull the other one! How will the threat of mass redundan- cies and worsening terms and conditions improve employee relations? Unless of course "improved employee relations" means silencing those pesky trade unions...

McNulty looks to the Government to "put in place incen- tives and contractual mechanisms that encourage change". In other words he wants the government to continue with the practice of compensating train companies for lost rev- enue as a result of industrial action but on a much larger scale.

It is certain he will get the Government to "support the industry in making these changes". Just recently, speaking at the bosses club, the Institute of Directors, George Os- borne told business leaders to "get stuck in" against "unions and interest groups". Some much for the bosses, their Gov- ernment and its hired hands, what about the unions.

The unions have come out against the report, but not in a sufficiently focused or urgent manner. McNulty is looking for some "quick wins" to generate momentum in the "change programme". The unions need to respond likewise. A union action plan would include the following points:

• Setting up a fighting fund to enable the unions to run longer disputes than the one or two-day strikes which have become the norm in recent years.
• The unions should order their financial affairs so as to minimise the effects of sequestration.
• The unions should set up procedures ("pattern bargain- ing") to enable them to run a dispute across several differ- ent companies at once.
• Encourage railworkers to take their campaign into local anti-cuts groups and trades councils — to mobilise support and when the time comes, strike solidarity.
• Cross-union liaison and united action. Rail unions should campaign to involve their members in local anti-cuts campaigns.
• Bring public political campaign, starting now, for rail re- nationalisation, against new anti-strike laws, and for the comprehensive restoration of workers' rights to strike, picket, and organise.

The rail unions affiliated to the Labour Party, ASLEF and TSSA, should use their affiliation to press this pol- itical campaign within the Labour Party and demand support from Labour leaders and MPs.

Preparing for 30 June

In some areas, notably Nottingham, union activists are preparing for the probable strike against pension cuts on 30 June in advance of a vote.

They are organising a joint strike committee of the unions likely to take part — NUT (teachers), ATL (teachers), PCS (civil service), and UCU (lecturers). They are inviting rep- resentatives of other unions whose members face the pub- lic-sector pension cuts, and job cuts, like Unison, CND, and Unite, and people from anti-cuts campaigns, to come along too.

For 30 June itself they plan a proper strikers' meeting, where strikers can debate and put proposals on the next steps for the campaign.

In other areas, it is different. The preparation is in the hands of full-time union officials, with cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and ral- lies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and cross-union liaison only at top level.

A lot depends on which approach dominates. 30 June is the first splash of substantial generalised trade-union action against a Coalition Government programme which threat- ens both the services and benefits we depend on: civilise capitalism and the very fabric of the trade union movement.

After 26 years of difficulty since the defeat of the miners' strike in 1985, union strength has become heavily concen- trated in the public sector. On 2010 figures, public-sector union density is 60.4 percent of all union mem- bers, but only 17.4 percent of non-members.

We want the demands of the dispute and our future in- dustrial strategy to be worked out in the democratic struc- tures of the union (not in union head offices). Workers must start to ask the questions — what would constitute a vic- tory? What are we doing after 30 June to secure that victory? So far, the unions have left these questions open.

If 30 June is allowed to pass as a limp one-off protest, then the Government will increase its attacks. If 30 June begins the start of a growing ferment of resistance, then the unions can rebuild themselves and their strength.

The AWL National Committee already discussed many of these questions in a meeting on 7 May, and has produced a discussion document to be updated, corre- cted, and expanded by the discussion at the 28 May meeting.

The meeting will be open to interested non-members of AWL, who work closely with us in those unions. The aim to exchange experiences and work out a common line for organising for 30 June and for the struggle after 30 June. This will provide the basis for AWL members' mo- tions, amendments, speeches and so on in the different unions.

We will discuss the response we should advocate if some employer should gain a court injunction against the 30 June strike. Recent court cases have shown that the minor errors inevitable in a union ballot of a large, diverse, and often chang- ing workforce provide enough basis for an employer to get an injunction against any large strike ballot result if he wishes. The "balance of convenience" is always on the side of banning a strike. But isn't this the one occasion, of all oc- casions in recent years or the foreseeable near future, when the unions should be bold enough to defy an obviously class-biased court ruling?

The meeting will also hear reports from the diverse local anti-cuts committees round the country, and formulate views on best campaign strategy.

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Kamal Abbas has been active in Egyptian workers’ struggles since the mid-1970s. His thirty-year career as an activist encompasses a vast array of experiences, from producing rank-and-file bulletins to leading workers’ uprisings under a hail of rubber bullets.

Kamal spent time in prison and on the run, and as recently as 2008 the Mubarak regime was still trying to lock him up. With the overthrow of Mubarak, he and the organisation he leads are at the forefront of Egypt’s burgeoning independent workers’ movement.

You could not tell the story of Egyptian workers over the last four decades without returning to the story of Kamal Abbas. The two are intertwined in one narrative which is not only fascinating and inspiring, but rich with lessons.

GOING TO WORK

"After the war with Israel in 1973," Kamal told us, "everybody in Egyptian society wanted to do volunteer work", to dedicate themselves to improve society. Many people volunteered for the army. It was during his time in the army that Kamal met university students who were revolutionary socialists who convinced him about socialist ideas. After he finished his service he put his principles into practice by getting a job in the giant iron and steel works in Helwan, an industrial town south of Cairo.

Kamal was one of many young Egyptian activists to go and work in industry — in the same way that AWL members and other young socialists have got jobs in sectors like the railway service in order to take part in the class struggle. Kamal says it was an obvious move to make at a time of growing working-class militancy in Egypt, culminating in a general strike and uprising against the removal of food subsidies in 1977 — the year that Kamal went to work.

Kamal would work in Helwan for the next twelve years, experimenting with all kinds of methods of struggle. They gradually built up grassroots organisations and a base of support among the plant’s 20,000 workers.

In 1979 he was elected to the executive of the official ‘unions’ in the factory, but was prevented from taking his position. From 1998, under Nasser, all unions had been amalgamated into a single federation, controlled by the state. From the start the Centre faced occasional repression and ended with Kamal’s expulsion from the factory. Although it was over the apparently minor issue of lunch subsidies, this big strike called forth vicious repression from the army and the police, who invaded the factory. Although the strikers eventually won their demands and more, many activists and leaders were hunted down. Kamal and others fled to avoid torture, or worse. Although he was captured and interrogated, he was released after a month and half in prison — but had lost his job.

NEW BEGINNING

It was then that the Centre for Trade Union and Workers’ Services began to cohere. As far back as 1986, working-class activists in Helwan and other centres had been talking about setting up a campaign for real trade unions, independent of the state. The wave of solidarity from other workers and from many opposition political organisations which accompanied the Helwan strike made this seem like the right time to launch the project. Kamal slept on people’s sofas, worked night and day and visited as many of his former colleagues as possible asking for money and support. The CTUWS was born in March 1990.

From the start the Centre faced occasional repression and constant denunciation from the regime. A few years ago, Tamer told us, the front page of a widely-read government newspaper claimed that the CTUWS were foreign agents paid to undermine the Egyptian economy. (He understood exactly when I told him how Sue denounced the FBU as ‘Iraqi agents during the 2003 firefights’ strike.)

The first decade was hard. The CTUWS received some funding from Oxfam, but relied mainly on the good will and support of Egyptian workers, particularly in Helwan. It was able to play a role in a large number of disputes, and open offices in four other cities. It became a highly visible force, attracting many workers in struggle as well as others looking for a way to oppose the government (this includes Tamer, who became politicised as a student and began his work with the CTUWS as a translator). But it was with the growth of Egyptian workers’ struggles in the new century that the Centre really came into its own.

From 2004, Egypt was shaken by a growing wave of working-class militancy — sparked by both declining living standards and a feeling that the old order was crumbling. One of the most spectacular struggles was by the 27,000 textile workers of the Nile Delta town of Mahalla el Kubra.

In 2008 the strike committee of local government-employed real estate tax collectors, victorious in their dispute over parity with central government income tax collectors, converted itself into an independent union, RETA, and won recognition from the state. That was a massive step forward.

Other independent unions, among health technicians, teachers and pensioners followed. The CTUWS was already in touch with most of the key activists behind these battles, but with the rise of independent unions its role became crucial. It stood ‘shoulder-to-shoul -der’ with them. As well as helping train leaders and organisers for the new unions, helping write their constitutions and providing legal support, it facilitated links with the international trade union movement — particularly Public Services International, to which RETA became affiliated.

More than anything else, Kamal says, it was the space it won for the new, independent unions, with the help of the CTUWS, that prepared the way for the downfall of the Mubarak regime.

THE REVOLUTION

At the start of the revolution, according to Tamer, the labour movement was submerged in the general tide of mass protest, which included many thousands of middle-class youths. He himself spent a lot of time protesting in Tahrir Square. The initial workers’ demonstrations called by the CTUWS,New Beginning workforce, were targeted by the riot police.

Before long, however, they succeeded in bringing representatives of the independent unions and other workers in various sectors together — in a corner of Tahrir Square — to form an independent union federation, the Egyptian Federation for Independent Unions. Simultaneously, they stepped up their campaign among workers, calling for workers to combine participation in the revolution with building independent organisation in the workplaces.

The CTUWS was deluged by different groups of workers eager to build unions — and, as Mubarak attempted to cling to power, workers entered the stage of the revolution in their own right by organising a wave of strikes. These strikes, which combined protest against the regime with workplace demands, often focusing on the removal of cronies managers as well as wages, conditions and so on, grew to the point where activists were literally marching in defence of the revolution.

The workers’ mobilisation had broken the back of his rule. There are now 20 independent unions, although Kamal
said that it was very possible more had formed in the few days he had been out of Egypt! They have their own offices, and will hold their first congress in the autumn.

Tamer said he thought these unions had about a million members, as against the three million who were formally in the state “unions.” He was hoping for three million by the end of the year. Though Egypt is a country with over 80 million people, many are young and many are small farmers. There is no union of workers as an impressive start.

When asked at the London public meeting about how to avoid the development of an over-fed bureaucracy, Kamal said he thought it could be avoided by an emphasis on democracy and rank-and-file control. On the other hand, Egyptian workers “have a bad experience” of unions which the new movement feels ill-equipped to overcome. He stressed how much they need training for activists, organisers and leaders from established labour movements in other countries.

The new unions

The unions are currently campaigning about the minimum wage (and maximum wage), permanent jobs for precarious workers and renationalisation of privatised industries. Kamal argued that while the working class has won some important democratic space, the neoliberal economic model entrenched under Mubarak is very much intact. The new regime has declared strikes illegal (supposedly as a temporary measure), though with little effect.

We asked Kamal and Tamer about the role of women in the new movement. This is what Kamal said: “In the five years before the resignation of Mubarak, there were 3,000 strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations... Women participated strongly, even confronting the security forces, and were amazing. In some strikes workers slept out in the streets, and women participated in this too, though it goes against Egyptian traditions and customs. And women have played an important role in the independent unions, though not as much as we would have hoped.”

The CTUWS involves many women activists but has not set up any specific groups or campaigns for women. Kamal said that the Centre and the new unions are “concerned with workers, and we don’t differentiate between male and female workers.” At the same time, he and Tamer did accept that women workers face specific issues like childcare, the double burden of work at home, discrimination at work and sexual harassment. This is clearly an issue where the Egyptian workers’ movement needs discussion and development.

A WORKERS’ PARTY?

An important issue we discussed with Kamal and Tamer was that of working-class political representation, and whether there is a need to build a workers’ party in Egypt.

There are elections coming up in September; Kamal told us that the only force really well organised for them is the Islamic Muslim Brotherhood. Tamer thought that if they wanted to, the Brotherhood could win a majority (in fact it is only standing for half the seats). This is because of Egypt’s large rural population, and because the Brotherhood provides basic services which the Egyptian government does not (like Hamas in Gaza). Unlike many leftists in Britain, Kamal and Tamer think this is a serious threat. They both consider the clash between those who want a religious state and those who want a “civilian” (i.e. secular) state a defining issue in the period ahead. Kamal told us: “Yes, we consider them to be a great threat to workers. Why? Because the basic principle of the labour movement is to be built on the basis of no discrimination according to sex, religious or race, but they [the MB] are based on discrimination. They will not tolerate the participation of women, or Christians, or other minorities. Then if you look at their economic program you can find that it is neo-liberal. So how can they be in favour of the working class? They are against any socialist or even social organisation, so yes they are a great threat.”

For Workers’ Liberty, this only increases the need for a working-class political force which can link the new labour movement with other struggles for democracy and liberation, and present a clear pole of attraction to the discontented. Tamer, for instance, spoke of many thousands of young people who are mobilised around the issue of secularism; then there are the secularising youth of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whom could surely be prized away if there was a clear alternative.

But Kamal and Tamer felt that this was premature. They think it is necessarily to build up the unions much stronger before a workers’ political party can become viable. No doubt they are concerned not to wreck the new movement, which naturally involves workers with all sorts of political viewpoints, by rushing a political project. They felt that the new initiative of the Workers’ Democratic Party, launched by some union and left activists, is too weak to achieve much. We disagreed. The discussions will continue.

LEARNING FROM EGYPTIAN WORKERS

Egypt’s new labour movement needs solidarity. They want official recognition, messages of support, direct links and training from unions in other countries. They feel they have a lot to learn.

While the Egyptian workers can learn from workers’ movements in other countries, we can also learn from them. The long-defeated, sluggish and heavily bureaucratic British labour movement needs the spirit of daring, creativity, self-sacrifice and revolt which has allowed the Egyptian unions to play a central role in their country’s revolution. In absorbing that spirit, we can also rediscover and develop the best traditions of working-class struggle in our own country.

Solidarity with Egypt unions will be at the core of the new working-class internationalism necessary in the coming period of fightback against capitalist austerity and repression.

How you can support Egypt’s new labour movement

• Invite an EWS speaker to your union branch, college/university or campaign group, and pass a motion of support for the campaign.
• Make direct links with the Egyptian unions. Through the CTUWS, the campaign can put you in touch with Egyptian workers in the appropriate sector. We want to twin British unions and branches with Egyptian unions.
• Demand that your union builds links with the independent unions in Egypt, breaking any links with the old state “unions”, and campaigns for this in international labour movement bodies.
• We hope to send a delegation to Egypt later in the year. Please get in touch if you would be interested in taking part.

For more information, including a model motion, email info@egyptworkerssolidarity.org or visit www.egyptworkerssolidarity.org

Kamal and Tamer attended the Fire Brigades Union annual conference, where they were presented with an engraved fire axe by general secretary Matt Wrack and warmly welcomed by delegates. They spent half a day at the TUC, meeting officials from a variety of other unions. They also spoke at two EWS public meetings, one in Liverpool attended by 70 activists and one in London attended by 140 (standing room only)! This is text of Kamal’s speech to FBU conference.

I’m happy to speak to firefighters’ delegates. Firefighters, who risk their lives for the sake of duty.

When I think back to when I started my life as a worker, in the iron and steel industry, I remember when I took part in leading the great strike of 1989, and how me and my colleagues stayed strong and resisted in prison. We did this because we believed it was our duty.

And I remember my journey in building the Centre for Trade Union and Workers’ Services, as an organisation advocating and fighting for workers’ rights — above all, workers’ right to build their own, independent unions, and the right to strike. For the sake of those two rights, we went through many battles; we faced many obstacles. Each time I found myself in front of the interrogators, I said to myself: I am doing my duty.

And when we participated in the revolution, from the beginning, we passionately wanted workers to play their role in its victory. We released statements, we organised meetings and we played our full role in the revolution. In the last days of the revolution, we used the weapon of strikes — and we felt that we had done our duty.

After the revolution, we moved towards forming more independent unions. We toured around Egypt’s industrial cities, to help and encourage workers to form independent unions, based on democracy, unions dominated by workers’ will and capable of defending their rights. And when we did this, we thought we were doing our duty.

And today I trust that, as you meet together in this conference, you will discuss how to defend the rights of firefighters, those heroes who risk their lives as a price for doing their duty. To all of you I pay my regards and respects.
This is the third and final part of a review article on Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt. It covers the history of the First International, the workers’ movement in which Karl Marx was active from its founding in 1864, the anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin was active from 1868, and the split in the International in 1872, in which Marx and Bakunin were the leading figures on opposing sides, and the broad out- lines of anarchist development since 1872.

The First International recruited substantially from its activity in supporting workers’ strikes. It was initially a coalition of national workers’ federations, and many people who were not really socialists at all but rather radical democrats. In 1844 all the schools of socialist thought, the Marxians’ too, lacked authoritative, readily-available texts codifying their ideas.

In 1864 nothing written by Marx was in general circulation. The Communist Manifesto of 1848 had had no new edition in any language since 1850. New editions in various languages, including English, appeared in 1865, as the Internationale created a reading public for them, but only after. Marx’s Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy had been published in 1859, but only in German, and it was a severe economic text, with no immediate political ips in it. Marx published the Contribution in 1862 in French translation. In 1872–5 (an English translation, in 1866).

By patient argument within the International, Marx won a majority for three key ideas: One: that strikes and trade unions must not only be sup- ports for innumerable strikes, but were central to the working-class organisation and educating itself for emancipation. In a long debate in the General Council with an old Owenite socialist, John Western, Marx refuted the alleged “iron law of wages” beheld by many socialists at the time, according to which capitalism inevitably reduced wages to a subsistence minimum and all battles for higher wages must be fruitless. Two: that the working class must aim for the expropria- tion of the capitalists and public ownership of the means of production. The Proudhonists traditionally looked instead to the growth of a network of workers’ cooperatives linked rather than expropriating the capitalists. Bakunin sided with Marx on this.

Three: that the working class must engage in political action (battles for reforms made by law, and electoral action) as well as economic struggle.

CLIMAX

The climax of Marx’s activity in the First International was his writing of “The Civil War in France”, the Interna- tional’s statement of solidarity with the Paris Commune of March–May 1871.

This was the major text by Marx likely to be read by the activists and intellectuals who were elected representatives who were accountable to their vot- ers and easily recallable. It was “a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time” — not like a bourgeois par- liament, which, at best, limits and demands consultation from an executive government separate from it and stand- ing above it. It was the only way away with any separate, privileged bureau- cratic corps of unelected state officials. “From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workers’ wages.”

Explaining how his view differed from the anarchists, Marx wrote that “this new Commune, which breaks the modern State power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the medieval Communes” (idealised by Bakunin, and, later, even more, by Kropotkin). The Communal con- tention has been mistaken for an attempt to break up into a federation of small states” (Bakunin and his friends insisted that the future society must be a federation of small local units). Local liberties should be guaranteed: but “the few but important functions which still would remain for a cen- tral government were not to be suppressed, as has been in- tentionally mis-stated, but were to be discharged by Communal agents”.

“The Civil War in France was the main text on Lenin would later draw to write his State and Revolution, and the Bolsheviks to propose the role of workers’ councils (sovi- ets) as the form of a workers’ regime. Although they are warm towards the “communal” leaders, who favoured workers’ councils but came to reject a centralised revolutionary party and electoral activity by rev- olutionary socialists — some of them also to reject trade- union activity — Schmidt and van der Walt make no explicit and definite comment on workers’ councils, and in some cases seem to hold on to the pre-1914 revolutionary syn- dicalist line that trade unions, when smartered up enough, would embody workers’ role.

In any case, a split against a “Marxism” defined princi- pally by the Civil War in France was assuredly not a split against a socialism of manipulating the existing state ma- chine or “one-party dictatorship through an authoritarian state”.

What did Bakunin and his friends say at the time? They supported the Commune and agreed with Marx on that against the English trade union leaders in the International who recoiled in horror from the Paris workers’ revolution and Marx’s fierce defence of it. Like the Marxists, they would continue to honour the Commune and celebrate its anniversaries. As far as I know, they gave no direct reply to Marx’s swipe at them in The Civil War in France.

JACOBINISM

Bakunin complained that “in order to fight the monar- chist and clerical reaction they [the Commune] were compelled to organise themselves in a Jacobin manner, forgetting or sacrificing the first conditions of revolu- tionary socialism”. Kropotkin, later, would be even more critical of the Com- mune as too “Jacobin”.

Marx and Engels, by contrast, later, when the lapse of time had given licences for freer criticism of the Commune than would have been decent at the time of its bloody suppres- sion by the French bourgeoisie, wrote (in effect) that the Commune had not been “Jacobin” enough — not forceful, radical, pushy enough. “In the economic sphere much was left undone which, according to our view today, the Com- mune ought to have done. The hardest thing to understand is certainly the holy awe with which they remain standing respectfully outside the gates of the Bank of France. This was a serious political mistake. The bank in the hands of the Commune — this would have been worth more than ten thousand hostages [in terms of pressure on the bour- geois government at Versailles]”.

In 1871 Bakunin wrote about his encounters with Marx in the 1840s. “As far as I am concerned, Marx was, and is still, incomparably more advanced than I. He called me a sentimental idealist, and I was right; I called him vain, perfidious, and cunning.”

In 1872 the distinguishing mark of Bakunin and his friends was still “sentimental idealism” — the sentimental rejection of the necessary means of struggle in the name of a vague scheme for an instant ideal stateless future society. Marx regarded the Bakunin wing as a relapse of a section of the International into the old utopian socialism.

“We cannot repudiate these patriarchs of socialism [the old utopian socialists], just as chemists cannot repudiate their forebears the alchemists, [but] we must at least avoid falling back into their mistakes, which, if we were to commit them, would be inexcusable”.

Relapse was given momentum by the general backlash after the defeat of the Commune. In a similar way, the back- lash after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions had led in Sep- tember 1850 to a split in the Communist League in which the anti-Mark faction, according to Marx, fell into an ap- proach where “the will, rather than the actual conditions, was stressed as the chief factor in the revolution” and “the word ‘proletariat’ was reduced to a mere phrase, like the ‘word people’ was by the democrats”.

Later Plekhanov, in his pamphlet Anarchism and Socialism, would expound Marx’s thought in more detail, arguing that “in their criticism of the ‘political constitution’, the fathers of anarchism always based themselves on the Utopian point of view”, namely on the assertion that human nature favours liberty and solidarity, the state is an artificial imposion, and capitalism is the product of the state.

Bakunin, moving from his native Russia to study in Ger- many in 1840, became a revolutionary democrat in the 1840s. In 1849 he was praised by Marx for his role in a ris- ing in Dresden.

Took place in 1850, spent eight years in jail, mostly in Russia and in atrocious conditions, and then four years in Siberian exile. In 1861 he escaped from Siberia to Western Europe.

Bakunin was still a revolutionary democrat rather than a strong socialist. At first his political plan was to work with the liberal exiled Alexander Herzen. Then he flirted incondus- sively with Garibaldi and with the Polish nationalist leader Mieroslawski.

He came to call himself a “revolutionary socialist”. In 1867 he and some friends entered and tried to take over the just-launched radical-bourgeois League for Peace and Freedom.

He gave up within a year: but he wrote a elaborate docu- ment putting his views to the League — probably the largest and most complete political statement ever produced by Bakunin, notorious for rarely finishing things he started writing, ever published. It suggests that he then still saw his “revolutionary socialism” as more extreme than bourgeois
democracy, rather than in irreducible class opposition to it. He acknowledged the “complete emancipation... of industry and commerce... from the supervision and protection of the State”, renominated that “the majority of decent, industrious bourgeois” could quite well support him, Bakunin’s, programme; limited his social-economic demands to changing “the law of inheritance, gradually at first, until it is entirely abolished as soon as possible”, and made no demand for the expropriation of capitalist property or the collective ownership of the means of production for re-education and production.

Disappointed in the League, he joined the International in it, which on 1872-73 split-out, and now, he was heartily tired of the still thought of Marx as “vain, pernicious, and cunning”; but his writings of that time suggest that he was genuinely won over by Marx’s ideas. He committed through this translational mediating activity. They read as paraphrases — with a particular bias and twist, but paraphrases — of the general ideas of the International. He soon worked on a Russian translation of Marx’s Capital, which he would never finish. Diffuse and restless as ever in his thinking, in 1869-70 he got drawn into an alliance by a demented “nihilist”, Sergei Nechayev, who held that the true revolutionary was defined by support for all moral truths, including in his dealings with his own comrades, and “must ally himself with the savage word of the violent criminal, the only true revolutionary.”

He recouled from Nechayev: Bakunin supported France in the 1870 Paris-Prussian war, and with a consequent comrade, Bakunin made an abortive attempt at an anarchist uprising in Lyon (September 1870).

In 1870-71, finding sympathy for his resolutions against Marx among Swiss activists of the International, Bakunin led a faction fight which ended in the split of September 1872. Soon after that, in October 1873, he resigned from his local organisation, the Jura Federation, on grounds of ill-health and political disappointment. He spent most of the remaining time before his death in July 1876 in seclusion. Some of Bakunin’s ideas would be developed and codified, from the mid-1870s to World War One, by Peter Kropotkin, a much clearer and more systematic writer than Bakunin. But Bakunin’s is not the record of a political figure whose work in 1872-73 has represented a distinct “class-struggle” opposition to supposedly elder ideas coming from Marx.

**ELECTORAL**

The Bakunin wing’s opposition in 1871-2 to electoral activity was an exaggerated backlash against reaction against socialists allowing that activity to suck in too much of their energies and their hopes.

The general principle established by Marx of the need for socialists to build and seek to broaden trade union trades would be complicated by the rise of trade-union bureaucracy in the late 1870s. Some up-and-coming socialists being used to the spontaneous course in capitalistsociety.

Some of Bakunin’s ideas would be developed and codified, from the mid-1870s to World War One, by Peter Kropotkin, a much clearer and more systematic writer than Bakunin. But Bakunin’s is not the record of a political figure whose work in 1872-73 has represented a distinct “class-struggle” opposition to supposedly elder ideas coming from Marx.

**THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN’**

Title song “The Times they are a-Changin’” was a battle hymn for the youth whose aim was a new Republic. There are biblical undercurrents from the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Sermon on the Mount (the meek inheriting the earth), and Mark 10:31— “But many are who are now first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” “With God on our Side” was one of the most performed songs of the early Sixties. The tune was taken from Dominic Behan’s “The Patriot Game”. It deals with the distortions of history in school, the war-mongers falsely claiming to have God on their side during the course of the genocide against native Americans, the Mexican and Civil Wars, and then two world wars. There is a sardonic twist at the end: if God’s on our side, then he’ll stop the next war. “Only a Pawn in their Game” was a protest against the murder of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers in June 1963, following the successful enrollment of two black students at the University of Alabama earlier in the day.

**Another Side of Bob Dylan**

“Chimes of Freedom” was written during a drug-fuelled cross-country road trip in February 1964 which took in the Mardi Gras. Dylan and a friend are shown in a 1964 newspaper article and on a doorway to take cover as church bells begin to ring in.

In form it is heavily influenced by the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, and marked a turning point away from straight-talking, finger-pointing protest. Instead of support for a specific cause or individual, there are themes of dedication for all the dispossessed, marginalised and downtrodden.

**BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME**

The militant under-ground group Weatherman would take its name from a line in the song “Subterranean Homeless Blues”; “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the winds blows”. It was the theme from the movie “Easy Rider” and the Bob Dylan song that caught the mood of a generation.

**“Maggie’s Farm”** was possibly influenced by Pete Seeger’s “Penny’s Farm”, a song that criticised the meaness of a landlord. Dylan expands this out to condemn the whole system of industrial relations. Worker alienation is the main issue of the song. It indictsthe tasks in power who impose their uniformity causing human estrangement in the process. The song went through a revival during Thatcher’s early years in office.

“It’s Alright Ma” is a variation on the Blues singer Arthur Crudup’s “That’s alright, mama”. Dylan sings about a manipulative corporate America that cares only about profits and never about the damage done to people and their mental health. Some of the lines have become part of the language — “Money doesn’t talk, it sweats.” “Even the President of the United States sometimes has to stand naked.”

**Highway 61 Revisited** (1965). When Highway 61 Revisited was finished, Dylan commented: “My records are not gonna be better from now on... Highway 61 is just too good. There’s a lot of stuff in there which I would listen to.”

“Like a Rolling Stone” was a turning point for Dylan, original in its lyrics and musical style — and in its length, over six minutes. Dylan’s audience of young people expanded enormously with this one record. There has been much speculation over the years as to who the main character is, but whatever it is, he/she is an aloof, rich, cocooned individual suddenly hitting the bottom with Dylan repeatedly, tauntingly, asking how this feels.

“Desolation Row” (longer, at 11 minutes) has Dylan’s by now familiar group of targets — shameless academics, cold-hearted elite figures, faceless bureaucrats, hypocritical religious leaders. Those who escape to “Desolation Row” are the outsiders, the rebels, Marxists, anarchists. This is protest on a more sophisticated level than the pre “sell-out” “finger-pointing” songs.

**John Wesley Harding** (1967): “I dreamed I saw St Augus -

...apt the song, “I dreamed I saw Joe Hill”, about the martyred Utah union organiser. Dylan protests about the commercialism of 1960s America. The adaptation is far more sceptical about the power of collective action than “Hill”, and also rejects the idea of any individual martyr saving hu-

...All Along the Watchtower” was written at the time of historic events with Dylan’s manager Albert Grossman and the record company CBS. “Businessmen they drink my wine, ploughmen dig my earth”.

Dylan has a number of albums of Dylan in tribute. Check them if you can.

- All the lyrics are at www.bobdylan.com/songs
DEBATE

We should work in the mass organisations

Stuart Jordan responds to North London Solidarity Fed-
eration (SolFed) in our continuing debate on the differ-
ence in the praxis of testing theory in the real arena of class strug-
gle. The SolFed contribution to our debate on anarchism and class struggle (Solidarity 3-204) makes good use of the "straw man" technique of debate. This is an arguably a big-
er block on healthy debate in the anti-capitalist move-
ment. Pat is a "straw man" caused by a "hierarchical structure..." whatever that means. Before we can ex-
plore the interesting points of difference, it is necessary to clear away some of the straw.

We are not for "taxation of the rich to fund public serv-
ices" as an end goal. We are for a classless society based on the principle of "from each according to their ability to each according to their need". Our disagreement with SolFed is how to achieve that goal. (There is an interesting debate here about the use of transitional demands but it will have to wait for another day.)

No one in Workers’ Liberty "defers to the Labour Party or to trade union leaderships". We do not believe that the trade unions should stay within the "limitations of the cur-
tent anti-trade union laws". We think New Labour was a project of capitalist class war. We are in favour of striking against New Labour’s policies and Labour councils (as we think workers should have the right to strike against any future socialist governments). Our goal of independence is about how we relate to mass-working-class organisations.

MASS ORGANISATIONS

SolFed aims to initiate an "anarchist-syndicalist unions", its members sometimes hold union cards to "avoid splits in the worker’s movement between union members and non-
union members". But their involvement in the unions is purely occasional and defensive as the main task of creat-
ing organisations apart from the actually existing trade union movement with its seven million members. We believe that the current struggle taking place within the mass organisations of the working-class and it is unecessary to abandon those organisations to their middle-class leaders. The trade union bureaucrats maintain power through a conscious effort to keep the workers docile, apolitical and hopeless. Our task is to fight for a working-class programme and the fullest possible par-
ticipative democracy within the unions right now.

The struggle to build union strength against the bosses is also the struggle to organise workers against the bureau-
cracy. The current protecting revolutionary trade union movement will involve many splits and fusions. It is very improbable that the Trotskyist Unite, Unison and the Labour Party will be organising mass strikes and political action in the heart of a working-
class revolution. But we cannot ignore these mass organisa-
tions of our class in this debate. The struggle to change them for the better is an experience our class needs in order to create political equipment for the future.

HIERARCHY AND BUREAUCRACY

SolFed equates the attempt of the trade union advocate with the movement of the "Leninist" party. But this is dishonest. The mass, participative, democratising organisations that SolFed advocate would involve an organic leadership (elected individuals) linked to a base. That is a form of hier-
archy.

The problem is not one of "hierarchy" as such but rather that power has types. SolFed uses its interest to power to encourage democratic involvement and empower the rank-and-file.

The history of our class shows many revolutions — including syndicalists — who have won the leaderships of mass organisations in order to more effectively argue for their political ideas. They do not stand for election in order to win power for power’s sake. SolFed look at Stop the War Coalition, the trade union movement and the Labour Party and diagnose a problem of "hierarchy". We look at these organisations and diagnose the problem of "middle-class politics". True political conflict can’t be divorced from questions of organisation, but SolFed stand the relationship on its head. In their scheme, the hier-
archial form of politics is what enables the middle-class poli-
tics. In fact, the bureaucratic structures are necessary to graft middle-class political leadership (be it the Blairites, the six-
figure salaried trade union leaders, or the Muslim Associa-
tion of Britain) onto a workers class base. Our task is to make clear these contradictions and build up rank-and-file organisa-
tion to challenge the leadership politically and or-
ganisationally.

At any given time, some people have a deeper under-
standing, more resolve, courage or ability than others. If this were not the case, then revolutionary organisa-
tions would not need to exist.

Better journalism

The first major problem with Pat’s piece is the way he con-
flates the issue of content in the media and the right to privacy. I think all good socialists would agree that having a main-
stream media obsessed with celebrity and not dealing with politics is a bad thing. However, to condemn this change in the media as not a natural evolution is barmy. It is, sadly, completely natural, and brought about by capitalism seek-
ing to maximise profit from the press.

It is a lot cheaper and easier for the media to deal with "tittle tattle" than to pay investigative journalists, or for jour-
nalists to sit in courts/ council meetings/ Parliament. It is our role as socialists to address this issue.

Pat is wrong when he offers (the bourgeois dominated) courts to step in and save the media. When have socialists turned to the courts to defend us on such large issues? In a situation where the left is weak, it is prac-
tical to pursue cases against sexual discrimination/right to strike, etc.; through the courts, just as we take a stand in Parlia-
mentary elections and would support workers’ rights bills. But it is also important that we do not rely on one means to dismantle another what they can and can’t print. Rather we should be taking this on ourselves, perhaps through empowering media unions, for example, not relying on a law.

Pat is right to say a right to privacy should apply to us all, as should access to the courts. We do have privacy laws in UK/EU law already.

What is worrying is that an extreme version of this right to privacy is being used as a tool to demobilise the power of right to privacy. For example, it would be banned from even reporting on an injunction is just crazy.

Robert Fox, Oxford
PCS needs a strategy to win

By Matthew Thompson

A report produced by the University of Portsmouth and accountancy firm PKF, “Welfare to Work in the Civil Service”, is based in part, it says, on interviews with “23 clinicians” – doctors and nurses – who work with employ groups: 18 of who were identified via Kennedy Scott and five via the GMB.

Kennedy Scott is an em- ployment training provider currently delivering the New Deal programme for the Department for Work and Pensions in London and the West Midlands. The re- port recommends that “the DWP work with Kennedy Scott to work more closely with American Work for America Works”. The GMB union said the company is known for the draconian regime it im- poses on its unemployed “clients”.

In a statement on the re- port GMB General Secre- tary Paul Kenny is quoted as saying: “The GMB is looking at how best to support both our members who are facing redundancy as the public sector cuts vote to protect those suffering from the scourge of long term unemployment. We welcome the idea of pilots across the country to evaluate how best to do this.”

Since then a future has erupted about why the GMB is, seemingly, in- porting workfare. Paul Kenny wrote the following in response to a question from Jeremy Corbyn:

“The GMB and myself are 100 per cent opposed to Workfare and the privatisation- ation of any public service, including Employment services.

“…it is absolutely clear that the GMB will not support welfare to work and we are pledged to support PCS in their struggle to defend public service employment.”

Rank and file activists in the GMB need to hold the leadership of the union to account.

In the Postalsector the militants have fought a number of campaigns for the improvement of pay and conditions. The struggle for postal workfare was evidently a key aspect of this. The GMB leadership had a clear choice to make: support the campaign or fight it. The GMB's chosen path was to support the campaign. This decision was made in isolation, without consultation with the rank and file. The result has been the loss of support for the campaign and the alienation of activists across the union.

One highlight of the confer- ence was the presence of Egyptian union leader Kemal Abbas. The FBU had facilitated his invita- tion to the TUC and Egypt Work- ers Solidarity) and Abbas began his tour with a speech at the conference.

After comparing firefight- er’s dilemma of doing a “good” job and getting fired,ABBASS called for the GMB to make “a clear commitment to picketing.”

Although the FBU is more democratic than its counterparts, the use of selective action is needed to win victories. The GMB's decision to support the campaign was a mistake, and it is clear that the leadership needs to be held accountable for this decision.

Support RMT member Clara Orgadie at her disciplinary hearing, Thursday 26 May

10am, Initial Cleaning Company HQ, 13-27 Brunswick Place; nearest: Tube: Old Street, exit 1

FBU conference: no ballot yet

By Darren Bedford

FBU conference last year was used as a strategy to win on issues including pensions, pay and job cuts, although no timetable for action was set.

Speakers expressed the widespread anger with the government’s plans, which would make public sector workers pay more, work longer and get less. Firefighters will be hit particularly hard.

They warned of the need for action, but dif- ferences over timing and tactics to follow the council resolution, which was passed, called for a membership survey and continued lobbying in ad- vance. However, many delegates supported a counter-resolution from the London region calling for immediate ballots for industrial action including strikes.

The conference passed resolutions on cuts and austerity, going further than most in arguing for pro- gressive for tax- ation and public ownership as an alternative to the priv- ileration of the govern- ment and Labour op- position. The union warned that anger on pay was rising, given the em- ployers’ refusal to offer any increase and the threat of further job cuts.

Despite a good debate, the conference overwhelm- ingly rejected a motion to re-affiliate to the Labour Party and authorise a ballot on the issue.

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On one hand, the conference is a positive step forward for the GMB, as it shows that the union is willing to fight for its members' rights. On the other hand, the conference's failure to actually take any action is disappointing. The union needs to take decisive action to win a victory for its members.

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Tahrir Square comes to Spain

By James Bloodworth

“This is a protest they will never understand” said a youth, as he, along with around 2,000 other young people, crowded into Puerta del Sol square in Madrid, de- 
ing a ban on demon- strations in the days before municipal and re- gional elections on Sun- day 22 May.

Resistance democracy in Spain is less brittle than the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt, and can “deal with” movements such as these youth demonstrations even if it can’t understand them. But the inspiration from Tahrir Square is obvious.

The establishment sees free-market capitalism as sitting at the end of a visi- ble thread running through every epoch of human his- tory. When a mass of peo- ple appear who do not share in this grand utopian project, the establishment’s response is total bowdier- ment. What could these people possibly be re- belling against? Protests against this or that govern- ment measure they can un- derstand. A radical rejection of the whole sys- tem they cannot.

This was put into play on 15 May. The police initially tried to disperse demon- strators, but since then the sheer numbers have forced the authorities to take a softer approach.

One of the most popu- lar slogans has been “Democracy Now”, and stalls have been set-up urg- ing people not to vote for the two major political parties — both of whom are planning harsh austerity measures.

Another chant was “vio- lence is earning 600 euros”, refreshingly counteracting predictable bourgeois sen- timentality about broken windows whenever protests spill over the usual limits.

Spain currently has an unemployment rate of 21.3% — the highest in the EU — and a youth unem- ployment rate around 45%.

Some Spaniards who do have jobs are going months without pay, with their em- ployers hanging the threat of unemployment over their heads.

The demonstrators in Madrid and other cities have declared their deter- mination to continue the occupations of public squares and spaces for another week following the 22 May local and regional elections, which saw de- felts for the ruling Socialist Party.

Some of the demonstra- tors say that the movement is “post-democratic”, “not political”, and “beyond left or right”. But, as George Orwell put it, “There is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics’.

If radicals try to keep out, that does not abolish politics, but leaves it to the conservatives (and so the right-wing People’s Party) to gain in the 22 May elec- tions, and on an as-high-as-usual toll. The radicals also leave themselves vul- nerable to demagogues.

Most encouraging is the fact that, outside of the mainstream narrative that ordinary people should bear the burden of the follies of European financial and political elites, large numbers of young people in Spain are demanding an alto- gether different course, even if the details are at present sketchy.

Tory NHS plan: profit not need, will rule

David Price, Senior Re- search Fellow at the Cen- tre for Health Sciences, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, talked to Stuart Jordan

The public planning sys- tem, which ensures that resources are allocated according to health needs, not local political biases, will be broken up. We will see increasing private investment over the allocation of re- sources and allocation driven by financial incen- tives.

At the moment Primary Care Trusts must provide comprehensive universal healthcare for geographic populations. GP commis- sions of consortia will not have this statutory duty. Consortia will represent specific geographical areas but their duties to the whole population are not specified in the legislation. In fact the consortia can form from GP practices anywhere in the country. They will be able to choose which patients they want to take responsibility for. The Bill will allow GP consortia to choose which services they charge for. At the moment, this power lies solely with the Secre- tary of State. Conse- quently, they can decide which services are part of the NHS and which are not. Private companies are also coming in to choose which pa- tients they want to treat.

So, instead of a publicly owned system which plans for the provision of univer- sal healthcare, we will have a private planning system. This involves a different set of priorities, involving se- lection and not inclusiveness.

There are a lot of confus- ing messages coming out of the “listening exercise”. At one point it was stated that Andrew Lansley would be sacked from his role as the Health Minister. Days later he was sitting on the front bench surrounded by Tory ministers.

I believe that Steve Field [chair of the government- appointed review body] originally supported the re- forms but is now more crit- ical. I like many, he sees threats to integrated care and the hospital infra- structure, as companies come in and cherry-pick services.

However, his criticism does not address all of the pri- sues. Some say that the Bill is unmeasurable. I am not sure whether the health service groups in op- position will be convinced by the listening exercise.

The Royal College of General Practitioners is leading the charge on chal- lenging the Bill and is doing extremely well. Among other things they are calling for the Bill to re- store the principle that the Secretary of State has a duty of care to provi- sion of a comprehensive service, that only the Min- ister has a statutory power to impose charges on serv- ices. They are fighting hard against fragmentation of the service.

CRITICS

Some critics say that even without legislative reform the government can push ahead with privatisation.

We already see the pri- vate sector management is coming in, wards are clos- ing down, and staff are being sacked. A general re- duction in NHS capacity gives potential for the pri- vate sector to grow. But the Bill is signifi- cant. It is a political mecha- nism to remove responsibility for providing universal healthcare from the Secretary of State in order that a different fi- nancial system can be in- troduced.

Under a private con- sortia power to charge and the power to decide what constitutes the NHS, the door is opened to user charges and co-insurance.

Mark Britnell, former Head of NHS Commission- ing and now working for KPMG and the Prime Min- ister’s Kitchen Cabinet on health care, believes that is exactly what should hap- pen. We also know that supplementary health in- surance is the reform path of choice in a number of OECD countries, so it is definitely a fashion.

Seventeen years ago Julian Tudor-Hart un- earthed similar objec- tives formulated by Marshall Thatcher in the 1980s. He called it “the project” because it had been the undisclosed goal for so many years. If there is a project it is now nearly completed.