TORIES MOVE AGAINST NEW ARRIVALS

Migrant and local: workers unite!

See page 5
Thailand: free Somyot!

By Riki Lane

In recent weeks more than 100,000 anti-government protesters have taken to the streets of Bangkok and closed down various government offices.

The “yellow shirt” protesters are responding to the Yingluck Shinawatra government’s attempt to pass an amnesty bill that could lead to the return from exile of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck’s brother.

The amnesty bill is also criticised by left wing elements of the “red shirts” because it does not include prisoners detained under Article 112, including many union and democracy activists, such as Somyot Prueksakasemsuk.

Left-wing pro-worker red shirts characterise the yellow shirts as fascistic, anti-democratic, royalists who want to replace elected government with a more directly monarchical rule.

Indeed the yellow shirts explicitly call for a military coup and a system where many members of parliament are nominated by the monarchy and the military. It may sound a little Maoist, but I think in Thailand there is a struggle between a modernising neo-liberal bourgeoisie versus feudal remnants in cooperation with the military.

The problem for the left is that they have not been able to win the “battle of democracy”, so the anti-monarchist, anti-coup, pro-democratic movement is hegemonised by the bourgeoisie, not the working class.

The last three elections have produced Thaksin lead or influenced governments, which have made major reforms that benefit workers and peasants.

The yellow shirts know they cannot win elections, so they organise reactionary mass mobilisations.

The government knows it cannot rely on the military to put down the yellow shirts, and also works to avoid violent confrontation.

We need to support the democratic anti-yellow shirts struggle, while also helping build the left wing forces that can shift the terrain of the battles to working class issues.

Recently in Australia, state and national union peak councils adopted motions supporting Somyot and other political prisoners. These were tabled at the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) regional meeting in Bangkok last week, during the yellow shirts mobilisations.

Motions similar to the one below could usefully be put to trade union meetings in the UK.

1. We express our concern and opposition to the use of repressive laws in Thailand to stifle democratic debate and the right of people and workers to freedom of expression. We, as part of the worldwide labour movement, pledge our support for international working people’s solidarity and for the continuing struggle for democracy in Thailand.

We call for:

- Immediate release of Somyot Prueksakasemsuk
- Immediate release of all political prisoners in Thailand
- Abolition of Article 112 (The Lese Majeure law)

2. To organise an ITUC Asia Pacific delegation to visit Somyot in jail and to meet with his support group in Bangkok.

- thapoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/
- aawl.org.au

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**Nurses: demand 4:1!**

**By Angela Dean**

The 4:1 nurse ratio campaign argues nurses cannot look after an unlimited number of patients without out patients suffering. To ensure there is a safe number of nurses on shift there needs to be a mandatory patient to nurse ratio (4:1). Without that bottom line, financial pressures will always lead to reductions in nurses on shift. NHS nurses have to look after up to 14 patients at a time. One person can’t even identify the needs of that many people, never mind meet them. Nursing practice becomes limited to giving out medications, while the ongoing care and assessment of the patient is carried out by unqualified healthcare assistants.

Healthcare assistants are not adequately trained, supported or paid to be able to carry out this responsibility safely.

Research indicates mortality can drop by at least 14% if a high nurse to patient ratio is implemented.

The demand has been met in some US states and Australia and nurses have found that patient care and the well being of nurses have both improved dramatically.

The government is simultaneously starving the NHS of money while blaming staff in the NHS for the resulting decline in standards of care. They want to cut the wages bill. But wages paid at decent rates for all staff — should be the bulk of spending in the NHS.

Good healthcare is a joint effort, and a multi disciplinary approach is needed to ensure good outcomes, but the nurse is the lynchpin.

The nurse delivers almost all of the practical care. A healthcare assistant may be highly skilled and experienced, but will lack the authority to alert doctors to deteriorating conditions, or take part in emotionally difficult conversations with patients and families. Without adequate nursing staff warning signs are missed.

Lack of nurses has profoundly dehumanising effect on patients and staff. A recent Unison staff survey indicated that nine in ten nurses have skipped breaks, and over half regularly did unpaid overtime. Hungry and tired nurses do not have time and energy to stop and talk to patients. Nurses situations will try to make themselves less available. A patient reported to me, that in all the time he was an inpatient, the only twice did staff make any eye contact with him. Staff would come to “do things” to him and walk away without saying a word.

He was in continual pain, unable to stand, and unable to sleep, and had no-one to help him. This is inhuman and degrading treatment. It is torture. And yet it is happening to patients in every NHS hospital.

Everywhere there are nurses going home, having not eaten a meal for over 12 hours, exhausted, unable to return to their families, feeling that they have failed their patients.

In Unison’s survey three-quarters said they did not feel they had the time to deliver safe and compassionate care to their patients.

**BURNOUT**

19.7% said that situations that happened in Mid Staffordshire Trust were occurring in their Trust.

Nurses, so psychologically damaged by working in under resourced departments, can no longer relate to their patients. This “burn out” syndrome can affect every aspect of a nurse’s life leading to psychiatric illnesses and relationship breakdown. The experience of being looked after by someone who is unable to recognise you as another human being is terrifying.

On the 4:1 website, nurses in California, and in Victoria Australia both point out that campaigning and winning this demand is about advocacy and solidarity between nurses and patients.

It isn’t the guilt-ridden nurses who are the problem in some NHS hospitals, but the cuts in funding by government.

The miracle is, that despite the worsening conditions, the vast majority of patients still feel safe and well cared for in the NHS.

And the good news is that the 4:1 campaign is making progress; Unison and Unite have both signed up to the campaign, and the RCN is in talks about it.

But it will take more than speeches and motions at union conferences to achieve this. The campaign will need to be taken in every hospital, and every ward. It will need nurses to stand with their nurses in demanding this.

The campaign to win the demand was backed up by strike action in Victoria, Australia, and that’s what it might take here.

This is the demand that has the potential to transform the NHS.

• 4to1.org.uk

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**Labour “opt-in” plan can be blocked**

**By Rhodri Evans**

The Executive of the Unite union meets from 8 December. It will decide the union’s attitude on Ed Miliband’s drive to change union members’ Labour political-levy payments to “opt-in”.

Jim Kelly, chair of the London and eastern region of Unite, told the Guardian on 3 December: “Our executive has got to keep a collective voice, and that...has to be expressed through the block vote at a decision-making party conference where unions keep 50% of the vote,...”

“It unions stand together, we will win the votes at Labour’s conference, and supported by many constituency parties worried about the severe threat to the party’s finances from Ed Miliband’s proposals, as well as the negative impact on the left within the party, then the link can be successfully defended.”

The United Left grouping, which holds a majority on the Unite Executive, met on Saturday 30 November. Unite general secretary Len McCluskey was due to come to the meeting and speak about the “opt-in” issue, but didn’t show.

Unite assistant general secretary Steve Turner spoke instead.

Turner said that the “red line” issues are the same for the affiliated unions, that the affiliated unions will put a common position to Roy Collins (who is charged by Miliband to work out details), and that he expects the Executive to ratify that stand.

By now, all the affiliated unions have opposed the “opt-in” plan outright — with the exception of a few maverick right-wing unions and... Unite. So Turner’s speech marked progress.

Collins is scheduled to finish consultations by 24 December and then produce proposals to go to a special Labour Party conference in the spring. It is certain that the proposals will include some fudge or face-saver, rather than be simply “no change”, but there is now a real chance of making the fudge relatively harmless.

The Guardian on 3 December carried a report based, as we understand it, on “leaks” from Collins’s discussions supplied by Blairites who fear too soft a fudge and hope through the leak to stir up pressure for hard proposals to weaken the union link.

Maybe trade unions will be asked to “opt in” to the political levy, or not, only when joining the union, and existing payers will continue on the basis of “opt out”. Maybe plans will be eased in over five years.

The Guardian also reports that Collins backs the long-voiced demand of Labour right-wingers that the union vote at Labour Party conference be cut to below its present level of 50%. There is a danger of “opt-in” being introduced for new union members only, the number of levy-payers thus being gradually reduced, and that reduction being used to cut the vote.

“Defend The Link” campaigns are now highlighting the current level of union representation, and against rule-changes imposed on the unions from outside. 

• defethelink.wordpress.com

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**Job cuts at Npower**

**Expropriate the energy industry!**

**By Luke Hardy**

Energy giant Npower has said it will make 1,460 staff redundant. Their jobs will be outsourced overseas.

Offices in Stoke, Peterlee, Thurso in Teeside and Oldbury in the West Midlands are being shut. Other affected sites are in the north east and Leeds. 540 workers of nationality will be transferred to Capita.

Workers being made redundant are back office workers, who are being transferred as call centre staff. There may be more redundancies, sell offs and outsourcing, which will effect thousands more staff.

Despite Npower’s German parent group RWE being in trouble, profits are still being made in Britain. The CEO Paul Massara is still in line for a £150,000 bonus on top of his large salary.

Jobs are going to workers in India (Tata Consulting Services) because those workers get paid less than a fifth of the UK wage. Kevin Coyne from Unite has called it “naked greed”.

The three unions at Npower — Unite, GMB, and Unison — have put out statements condemning the job losses and are discussing possible industrial action. However as confidence among the workforce is low, a key role can be played by campaigners taking on Npower in a visible public way.

Putting on pressure over the job losses as well as highlighting the company’s tax avoidance, rising energy prices and its contribution to the destruction of the environment.

Exploitation may be sharper in India but workers in Britain have common interests with workers everywhere, against bosses regardless of nationality.

The Big Six including Npower have already made plans to offload British Energy giant and the government to remove certain green obligations and levies. The government has now caved and agreed to ease the timetable on the obligation to fit insulation and to pay some green levies out of general taxation.

This does not address either profiteering or job losses. The unions should pressure Ed Miliband and Labour to condemn these job losses and demand immediate public ownership of Npower and the whole energy sector.

There are practical things socialists, environmental campaigners and trade unionists can do now to support the workers. Organise demos outside Npower offices, power stations and depots, pass motions, have meetings and send out petitions, linking job cuts with fuel poverty and environmental degradation.

We need to defend every job and at the same time campaign for social ownership of the energy sector!
**Future unclear for Left Unity**

**Left Unity, launched in late 2012 by ex-Respect members Kate Hudson and Andrew Burgin, held its founding conference on 30 November.**

The one-day conference was to debate and decide the safer spaces policy, aims, constitution, electoral strategy and campaigning priorities for the organisation.

How did it do? The conference voted through a constitution and founding platform statement, but political debate was thin.

The time allocated for the platform debate was ridiculous; a three-minute proposing speech by each platform, followed by twenty minutes general debate. The two key platforms within LU were the, explicitly working-class, common-owned-roots and a broad hope for a united-everyone-to-the-left-of Labour Left Party Platform (LPP).

The Left Platform won by 295 to 101 votes, and the Socialist Platform was defeated by 216 to 122 votes. There was real support for the LPP at the conference, and this result was not behind the scenes bureaucratic stitch-up, but the debate left a lot to be desired.

The chair argued that it was impossible to ensure a balance of debate across all the platforms and picked seven speakers from the floor on the criterion of being young, women, or BME. The first five of the seven speakers were for the Left Party Platform. A number of us went to ask Standing Orders to step in and ensure a balanced debate.

Soraya Lawrence from the Socialist Platform put a procedural motion to take three speakers from other platforms to balance the debate, and that was accepted by conference.

Still no speaker from the Socialist Platform was called, so the second most popular platform, with 36% backing, got no time from the floor.

In speeches for the LPP, we got little reference to the consent of the platform, but generic speeches in favour of socialism, and calls for a platform that could unite the whole left — revolutionaries, reformists, anarchists, greens, and autonomists. (Ex-SWPer Tom Walker, who made that call, failed to mention which anarchists he planned to unite around a platform which called for the democratisation of the state in the interests of the majority.)

Bianca Todd delivered a speech a Unison witch-hunter would have been proud of, stating the debate had been skewed towards the LPP because working people, and BME people supported the LPP and so SF should stop complaining and take a look at themselves. As one of the young women who supported the SF and had been arguing for a more balanced debate, I was not impressed.

The LPP’s movers accepted amendments to their platform from Camden LU, moved by Ken Loach, which incorporated many (not all) of the left-wing ideas from the Socialist Platform and were or what is their test.

An amendment from the Lambeth branch to designate the platform adopted at the conference as only a platform, not a statement of aims, passed. A left-wing statement of aims also proposed by the Lambeth Branch was defeated.

This had the perverse result of giving priority to a statement of aims proposed as part of the LU constitution which codified all the least left-wing trends of the LPP and defined LU by a “belief in the benefits of cooperation and communal ownership and a democratically planned economy within which all enterprises, whether privately owned, co-operatives, or under public ownership, operate in ways that promote the needs of the people”.

The conference had opened with an attempt to get it to endorse a 14-page “Safe Spaces” policy, circulated only a few days before, with no chance to amend, one short speech for, and no debate. Ruth Cashman of Lambeth LU was able to challenge the standing orders committee and get an overwhelming majority to remit the policy to the next conference.

The rest of Left Unity conference consisted of a long debate on constitutional amendments. Many criticised the chaos and inaccessibility of the constitutional debates. A move to elect a new National Coordinating Group fell by 110 to 228. The old NCG remains in office.

A debate on campaigning and electoral strategy fell off the agenda. Two inspiring speeches, from the Tres Cosas campaign and victimised NHS union activist Charlotte Moto, ended the day.

Left Unity now goes forward with a founding “platform” and constitutional “aims” which contradict each other.

Criticisms and notes of caution about rushing into an electoral project without a clear political basis or well-estabished activities outside election time were not heard due to time constraints.

The cumulative decisions of conference allow the incumbent leadership to propose anything they like as the political stance of the organisation, by drawing as they wish from the amended LPP and the adopted “aims” statement.

Some local groups are building healthy local campaigns and unity initiatives. They will need to assert themselves to prevent what looks like a probable rightward and electoralist drift of Left Unity.

• More: bit.ly/lu131130

**Prioritise clarity over rhetorical flourish**

**Letters**

In the discussion arising from Sean Matgamna’s introduction to Workers’ Liberty 3/1: Marxism and Religion, there are perhaps two issues that need a little more debate.

The first is the extent to which Islamism is a “modern” movement or the revival of a centuries-old movement. The former is often put as an explanation of Islamism as straightforwardly the product of modern Western imperialism, which is simplistic and inaccurate. But it is important not to counter one simplistic view with its mirror-image. Islamism has many modern features, and while it has centuries-old roots and a life of its own, it is shaped and popularised in response to Western governments’ military adventures against mainly-Muslim countries. More discussion is needed about the balance of modernism and revivalism in Islamism.

The second issue is the role of “envy” or “covetousness.” There is Muslim scholarship, and there are writings by Engels, which describe envy and covetousness of, for example, nomadic Bedouins towards richer townspeople in the Islamic world in the past. But this is different from the assertion in Sean’s article of “envy” and “covetousness” that convinces it helpful to slip from “Islamists” to “much of the Islamic world.”

Envy and covetousness are not the same thing. Neither is resentment against imperialist oppression and inequalities in wealth. But for sure, there may be resentment—quite justifiably so—against imperialist oppression.

For sure, there may be resentment—quite justifiably so—against imperialist oppression and inequalities in wealth. But “envy” and covetousness at advanced capitalist societies. Sean’s article that “much of the Islamic world” now looks in the past. But this is different from the assertion in Sean’s article of “envy” and “covetousness” that convinces it helpful to slip from “Islamists” to “much of the Islamic world.”

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• More: bit.ly/lu131130
Six weeks before Romanian and Bulgarian workers will get unrestricted access to European labour markets, David Cameron has announced new benefit restrictions on all EU migrants.

The initiative is, to borrow the word used by European Commissioner Laszlo Andor, “nasty”. It is also, to judge it in terms of bourgeois policy-making efficacy, nonsensical.

Under the proposals, newly arrived EU jobseekers will not be able to claim any housing benefit ever, will not be entitled to out-of-work benefits for the first three months of residency, will not be able to claim any benefits for more than six months. A new minimum earnings threshold will be introduced before which benefits can be claimed.

A further measure — that any EU migrant sleeping rough or begging will be deported and barred from re-entry for 12 months unless they have a job to go to — is specifically aimed at Roma migrants.

This last proposal is the most obviously “nasty” message — “Roma go home” — but the other measures are as bad. EU workers will be second-class workers; they will pay tax but will not be entitled to make any call on public finances if they lose their job; they will be tolerated as long as they do not fall foul of the ordinary and inevitable uncertainties of being a worker in a capitalist economy.

These proposals set up divisions between migrant and local workers which can only boost paranoiology and a sense of helplessness among all workers, in or out of work. What does the future hold? Whatever it is the only thing we can do about it is to turn on our fellow workers.

A nasty policy, but also cynical. Cameron has no evidence that there are very many “benefit tourists” in the UK or many more getting ready to come to the UK.

Newspapers like the Daily Express, Daily Mail, and Daily Star have maintained a constant campaign of racist abuse towards immigrants. The labour movement must provide an alternative politics based on anti-racism and solidarity.

Migrant and local: workers unite!

- With waning poll ratings, the Tories are looking to the European elections in May and to compete with the anti-immigration stance of UKIP, which scored 19% in a recent poll (Observer/Opinium). Unfortunately for the Tories, but much more unfortunately for migrants, the Tories’ anti-immigration stance has only increased support for UKIP.

- The Tories also want to outbid Labour on immigration. Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper is just the latest Labour politician to say the last Labour government allowed immigration to grow “too far and too fast”. Even before Cameron’s announcements, Cooper was pushing the government to act on “benefit tourism”. Labour has fully entered this vile bidding war on immigration.

The Tories have been under sustained pressure from a right-wing tabloid xenophobic campaign against a predicted “wave” of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants. Because there is nothing the Tories can legally do about the relaxing of benefit controls on 1 January, they are reduced to talking tough and acting tough.

**COMMITTED**

Back in 2010 the Tories committed themselves to bring net migration down to fewer than 100,000 per year by 2015. That is not happening. They cast around for alternative ways to be seen to be on top of immigration.

In addition to the benefit crackdown, the government is pushing through a new Immigration Bill which will introduce many new points for immigration checks.

The new legislation will turn landlords, bank tellers, and workers at the DVLA into immigration police. All will be legally obliged to check the immigration status of people they come into contact with. The same Bill proposes a health care charge for non-EU legal migrants. The Bill will also restrict circumstances in which people who have been threatened with deportation can appeal their deportation.

The immediate effects of this bill will be to force many people into homelessness, or the over-crowded over-priced accommodation of criminal landlords. It will drive thousands of people further underground, into precarious employment, and a marginal existence.

Only better off workers and students from non-EU countries will be able to afford to come to the UK. Nearly 50% people who lose their right to stay in the UK win it back on appeal. With the new Bill those people could now fall foul of the structurally poor-decision making of the UK immigration authorities. These difficulties will be compounded by widespread cuts to legal aid.

Will we see a hike in forced deportations? Maybe, but it is difficult to see how any government could manage to, or afford to, deport the estimated 600,000 or more people who have, for one reason or another (often the failings of the state bureaucracy), no legal status.

For just this reason many bourgeois politicians were advocating amnesty for these migrants not so long ago. Just this summer, Boris Johnson re-raised the idea of an amnesty. The call was accompanied by offensive elitism — “ambulance-chasing lawyers” prevented most deportations, he said — but at least he was being realistic about the government’s capacity to reverse historical immigration, settlement, and integration of hundreds of thousands of migrants into the UK.

In this new mood of anti-migrant demagogy — where migration is used to distract from a relentless drive against all working-class people — there is now no serious talk about amnesty.

Nick Clegg, in a rush to be indistinguishable from his Tory partners, has said the Lib Dems were wrong to call for an amnesty before the election.

So we cannot be complacent. The political mood may turn into a real drive to deport thousands more, the people who are long-time workmates and neighbours. At the same time we should remember the thousands who are already victims of “involuntary deportations” every year.

All over Europe anti-migrant politics is growing. In polls a third of French voters say they would consider voting for the far right Front National. The Swiss People’s Party is now the largest party in the federal assembly with 28.9% support. It calls for the anti-Islamisation of Europe. In Austria the Freedom Party is more popular than ever. And the openly neo-Nazi Golden Dawn last year won 7% of votes.

British politics has some way to go before such blatant racism and xenophobia becomes “mainstream”, respectable, and rooted in day-to-day party politics.

But we are not so far away. The left and labour movement must combat every aspect of this anti-migrant drive.
Zero-hours contracts “keep wage costs down”

By Andy Forse

Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, a human resources consultancy firm, attempts to put a positive spin on the proliferation of zero-hours contracts.

The report concludes that employers mainly use zero-hours contracts for flexibility, and claims that most workers are satisfied with this arrangement as it provides flexibility for them as well. It suggests that, on the whole, if there is an issue surrounding zero-hours contracts, it is to do with the way they are managed, rather than the type of contract itself.

Why would workers report being “satisfied” with zero-hours contracts? For many workers, zero-hours contracts are the only option if they need a more flexible working arrangement (to cater for childcare responsibilities, for example). So workers’ “satisfaction” with zero-hours contracts may only be in contrast to the alternative of not being able to work at all.

The report states that employers say they want a flexible workforce to meet fluctuations in demand. What they really mean is they want flexibility from their workforce without having to pay a decent wage for it. Things like flexi-time, annual hours, and part-time contracts could also be used to achieve flexibility, but none of these serve the conveniences of the employer as much as zero-hours contracts, where maximum expense and inconvenience is off-loaded onto workers. According to the report, 20% of bosses say zero-hours contracts are part of a “broader strategy to keep wage costs down”, and 28% use them to “provide cost-efficiency”.

The arbitration service ACAS suggests that zero-hours contracts should be used to meet short-term staffing needs, but routinely, entire workforces are employed on a zero-hours basis. This can mean staff are left competing for shifts, causing insecurity that stresses workers, but stretches the profit margin for their bosses. Cultivating competition and individualism in this way weakens the bonds of co-operation and solidarity that are essential for building the foundations of workplace organisation and struggle. Any one found to be a “bad apple”, a dissenter, or suspected of getting ideas about class struggle, can easily be squeezed off the roster at the manager’s convenience.

As use of zero-hours contracts becomes commonplace, young and inexperienced workers will have learned not to question them, because they have never had a better deal. Zero-hours contracts are most common in the low-wage economy where their use is part of a toolkit of stingy and oppressive policies.

Socialists can raise awareness of how concessions are won by highlighting victories like the Hovis bakery strike in the summer, when workers forced their employer to put them on permanent contracts with optional overtime and secured a commitment to use zero-hours contracts only as a last resort.

Workers will be intimidated by their hostile environment and worry about being shunted off the books if they kick up a fuss. Capitalism has a never-ending creativity for finding ways to squeeze, drain, and exploit people for profit. Precarious workers must be equally creative in finding ways to organise. We can help empower them by providing political and material solidarity with their attempts to organise, suggesting strategies and tactics, and linking them up with other groups of workers.

Let the zero-hours workforce know there is a better deal out there for them if they fight! Support their struggles and push the bosses and managers back.
"After the strike, I’m very optimistic. I’m very proud of all the members who struck, and everyone who came to support us.

“We had a great turnout, even at 6am. It’s important to remember that this is a strike. It’s a new stage for the campaign. We’ve had lots of protests, but a strike is something different.

“Some managers made faces and ironic gestures at us, but you can tell that management are shaken.” — Sonia Chura, Vice-Chair, IWGB University of London branch

“3 Cosas is a model for the whole labour movement! “This is not about downtrodden workers asking for a ‘fairer’ deal, this strike is about power, about saying they refuse to be invisible any longer - workers make the university run and it is workers who should run the university.” — Daniel Cooper, University of London Union Vice President

“It’s a very militant strike and demonstration. We’ve turned away a lot of delivery vans, which is fantastic. “We’re more determined than ever to keep building for victory. Cooperation and solidarity, between outsourced workers, directly-employed workers, and students, will be key.

“We’ve supported student struggles, and they’re here supporting us. That solidarity will be essential to winning victory.” — Alberi Durango, President, IWGB

“The strike was remarkable. It was solid, with the vast majority of IWGB members out on strike and many on the picket lines.

“Far from a token protest, it caused major disruption. Deliveries for the Foundation Day celebration with Princess Anne were turned away, and managers were forced to take out the rubbish in the morning.

“Up until now, the University and Balfour Beatty were not interested in negotiating seriously. Today they looked taken aback at the strength of the strike, and the support it received from staff and students. Workers will be back tomorrow morning for another day of picketing and this dispute is only really beginning.” — Liam McNulty, IWGB member and 3 Cosas campaign supporter

Voices from the picket line

New Unionism 2014
A conference for activists
Saturday 22 February, 11am-5pm
University of London Union, Malet Street, WC1E 7HY

How can we defend ourselves against the bosses’ attacks, rebuild working-class power and transform the labour movement, including trade unions, into a force which can change society?

This conference will discuss and seek to learn from the experience of organizing the unorganized, in Britain and other countries, in history and today. It will hear from working-class activists on the frontline of today’s class battles, and of struggles to reshape trade unions. It will discuss issues including the changing shape of capitalism and the working class, the struggles of young, migrant and women workers, organizing in the private sector, outsourcing, fighting in bureaucratized trade unions and “revolutionary unionism”, approaches to working-class politics and much more.

Hosted by Workers’ Liberty
By Martin Thomas

In Solidarity recently we have discussed how political Islam can be both a “sigh of the oppressed” and a reactionary, right-wing movement. The Christian right in the USA shows the same paradox, more extravagantly. Thomas Frank, in his study of the rise of the right in Kansas, found that in Olathe, a poor Kansas City suburb which is a bastion of the right, “each of the conservatives I spent time with was either a blue-collar worker or married to one”.

He talked with one of the leaders of the right, Kay O’Connor, a working-class woman.

She supports tax cuts for the rich. “Progressive taxation is theft, plain and simple”. She supports voucher schools, explicitly on the grounds that they “produce good workers who will work for lower wages” and thus help business expand.

Her political programme does not even include the sort of social demagogy — government programmes for jobs, controls over corporations — which the far right of the 1930s used. Although she is, as far as Frank could see, the dominant character in her household, with her husband very subordinate, she believes women should be submissive and prides herself on being “a happy captive”.

How do these paradoxes work? Racism may serve as the glue to keep some of the US radical right together, but Frank reckons that is not true for them all, and not true in Kansas. Kansas right-wingers see themselves as in the tradition of campaigners for the abolition of slavery, like John Brown, and the 1960s civil rights movement.

In his book Pity The Billionaire, Frank describes the Tea Party as more secular, more concerned for economic rather than moral doctrine, and having its base somewhat higher in the economic scale, than the Kansas right.

But at the centre of the varied spectrum of the US plebeian right, as Frank describes it, is a religious idea. There is a natural order of society, defined by the Bible, the free market, and the US constitution. “It is God’s finger that wrote the Constitution. This is God’s country; these are God’s rights” (Glenn Beck).

At some vaguely-perceived point in the past, that holy trio prevailed. Society was maybe tough, but good. It has been spoiled by “the liberal elite”. Now the people are rising up against “the liberal elite”.

There are odd echoes here of the “privilege theory” current in some left-wing circles. The belief in society is that ordinary honest-to-goodness people are victims of “the elites” with their reading, their smooth talk, their put-downs, their cosmopolitanism, their un-Americanism.

“Harvard hates America”, as one right-wing best-seller puts it. The answer is to hearken to the simple truths which naturally well up from the ordinary, honest-to-goodness people.

And the US right “knows” how those ordinary honest-to-goodness people get the simple truths. They are in tune with God, and so in tune with the “real” America of small business and free-market competition, uncorrupted by the fast-talking ideologues of East and West Coasts.

This construct also allows politicians who are Harvard graduates and East Coast insiders to lead the right. If they speak up for God and the market, then they are not really part of “the liberal elite”.

Another eerily parallel with some trends on the left is the way the US right is sustained by a constant bubbling of scandals and revelations conveyed on the internet.

In 2009, the Right was galvanised by the idea that the Obama administration planned to set up internment camps for right-wing activists. Then the scandal faded, as it was revealed by the next one.

Frank attributes some of the rise of the right to the weakness of the left. “While leftists sit around congratulating themselves on their personal virtue, the right understands the central significance of movement-building — going door-to-door, organising their neighbours, mortgaging their homes, to push the gospel of the backlash”.

Another paradox, though: the right-wing activists’ organising energy remains undisputed partly because it is not based on a “realistic” pursuit of immediate and definable goals.

The US right has cut taxes for the rich, battered unions, increased social inequality. Working-class right-wing activists may see those things as part of the God-given order, but not as their cherished goals.

The government spending remains a big proportion of the economy. 33 years after Ronald Reagan took office, and will remain big. Abortion remains legal. Organised prayer in public schools remains illegal as illegal as when the Supreme Court struck it down in 1962.

But if your political motivation is to make a moral stand, then it remains strong. Your sense of victimhood — what Frank calls the “alienation” — remains fresh.

You think God is in control, not you, so results may be slow. Paradoxically, that fatalism can produce a determination and sense of duty unknown to the “realists”.

The lesson for the left, to my mind, is that we must develop politics which has a moral drive, a focus on the big picture and the long term, as compelling and vivid as the right’s, as well as, and based on, rational and realistic assessments.

• Thomas Frank, What’s The Matter With Kansas? (2004), and Pity The Billionaire (2011)
Greek protests against ecological destruction

By Theodora Polenta

A caravan of protest against the development of a new gold mine on the mountain of Skouries, on the Halkidiki peninsula in north-east Greece (near Thessaloniki), made its way to Athens on 25 November.

At a time of relative lull in other battles (participation was low in the general strike at the beginning of November), this movement has mobilised thousands of people on the street not restricted to the “usual suspects”.

On 9 November, a demonstration in Thessaloniki drew 10,000 people. There were small children on bikes with t-shirts reading “SOS Halkidiki”. Students holding banners and shouting slogans, against the effects of capitalism on the environment and on their future. Grandmothers. Many families. And all the major trade unions that have been in the forefront of struggle.

Also present were Green organisations and the whole of the left (Syriza, KKE, Antarsya, Plan B, Xekinima, the rest of the revolutionary left, and various anarchists). This sort of broad unity does not happen very often.

Despite difficulties and repression, despite the attempts by the government to equate them with “illegality” and one of the “two extremes”, the protests showed passion and fighting spirit.

The protests include people who had not previously participated in a march. People who were not familiar with holding banners and megaphones, or dealing with tear gas, are being brought into activity, and not only on the issue of Halkidiki.

The demonstration ended outside the Thessaloniki office of the public broadcaster ERT, shut down by the government and then occupied by the workers, and anti-fascist slogans were heard along the way.

There were slogans against the destruction of the region, slogans against the multi-national monopolies, slogans against repression, slogans against fascism, slogans against the memorandum policies (imposed by the EU, the European Central Bank, and the IMF), slogans against the privatisation of utilities, slogans against capitalism...

Listening to a new generation of young protestors chant: “the mountains are ours, the water is ours”, one cannot help but think that the future is ours too.

The Canadian-based multinational Eldorado Gold operates in Greece under its subsidiaries: Hellenic Gold and Thracean Gold Mining.

In the Halkidiki Peninsula, Hellenic Gold operates Stratoni, an underground, silver-lead-zinc mine, and is “developing” Olympias, a replacement mixed sullide deposit, and Skouries, a gold-copper mine.

In 2003 the Greek government granted Hellenic Gold an area of 317,000 acres, calculated to hold gold and copper worth about $12 billion.

A primordial forest has been “nibbled away” for private greed, leaving miners and toxic waste ponds, and risking the irreparable contamination of the area’s underground water table.

It was officially announced in August that in the Neohori area the water is unfit for use because of a high arsenic arsenic concentration, but the state has not investigated the connection between water contamination and the activities of mining companies drilling a short distance from the source of the village’s water.

The European Court of Justice has condemned Greece for the illegal financial aid of millions of euros for the mining companies in Halkidiki.

The residents of Halkidiki have stated at every opportunity their opposition to the project (with the sad exception of the direct employees of the company, whom the company are trying to turn into a private army to defend their interests).

Halkidiki is a place of great natural beauty, which is flooded each year by tourists from around the world. The movement of against the gold mining includes fishermen, farmers, ranchers, beekeepers, scientists, workers, unem- ployed, pensioners, students.

They have demanded from the authorities information and public consultation that have never happened. The residents then turned to scientific bodies, and asked them to ascertain the effects of the impact of mining.

Each time the residents of Halkidiki have protested, the riot police have intervened as an occupying army in the region, tear-gassing the protesters and arresting many.

We going into the forest of Skouries to gather the bees, they are met by armed men from Eldorado Gold who control the movement in the forest.

The residents’ attitude is not the “rejection of progress and development”, or the artefact of “extreme leftists who want to put a brake on investment”, which the coalition government and its media acolytes say it is.

The protests in Halkidiki threaten to destroy a primeval forest of hundreds of thousands of acres, and to transform the area into a toxic swamp (since gold mining requires the use of cyanide chemicals). The company says that it will restore the topsoil, but scientists doubt it can do that at all adequately. Even if a few hundred jobs are temporarily created, the mining will destroy countless others, those associated with tourism, agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, etc.

Scientific bodies such as the Technical Chamber of Greece, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Arnaia Forestry Department have taken a position against the gold mining in Halkidiki.

Hellenic Gold has shown that its assurances on observance of the required security measures should not convince anyone. On 12 September, a leak from a truck left in an ore pit in the area of Rentina. On 5 October, a ship’s captain of the ship MSC refused to load a cargo container from the company because toxic material has been found.

Toxic and hazardous materials are transported from the areas of Stratonio and Olymbiada without any precautions and dealt with by workers who are not made aware of the hazardous and toxic nature of the materials. The materials are then transferred to the company Balkan Logistics, in the Industrial Area Sindos of Thessaloniki, and loaded in containers onto ships to China. The consignments are declared just as iron, and not as arsenopyrite, and sent to China to detach the precious metal.

Biodegrading sects

By Rhodri Evans

33 years ago Tariq Ali quit the International Marxist Group (IMG), then the second-highest-profile group of the revolutionary socialist left in Britain.

He had never been a rank-and-file activist. He had been a well-known leader in the IMG ever since he joined it in 1968.

He called for the withdrawal of the Russian troops which had invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, while most of his comrades thought that their definition of the USSR as a “degenerated workers’ state” (which Ali shared) ruled out that call.

He was right on that; but he didn’t stay to argue. He quit. He has been “around” the left ever since, but never really active. He declares that “the communist ideal” is dead.

In 1986 he used the Guardian on 26 November to claim that the arrest of leaders of a tiny Maoist sect, on charges of holding three women captive for 30 years, “tells us about the far left” in general.

Nothing special about Maoists, he says. “The Maoists’ antics were rivalled by a number of Trotskyist sects... Even those most critical of Stalinist style and methods tended to reproduce the model of a one-party state”. He considers the (now bio-degraded) Norwegian Maoists, however, not so bad: “a far cry from the cult... in Brixton”.

Best to bio-degrade into a bourgeois or social-democratic career, and then you’ll avoid the risks of anything so intense as revolutionary activism...

As well to argue that since the pursuit of science can lead to such proposals we need to reach the workers in the company and to invite them to fight with us for a better future for all of us, and convince at least a part of them.

Otherwise there is scope for intervention by the fascist Golden Dawn movement, which, under the guise of “supporting the metalworkers”, sides with the government.

The last word belongs to the residents of Halkidiki: “We are the residents of Halkidiki and those who solidarity with them from all over Greece. “For as long as we have power, we will come out on the streets to fight for our area. We are not protesting just for our rights, but for our very lives and the future of our children. “We stand in solidarity with every activist who fights for our area. We are not protesting just for our rights, but for our very lives and the future of our children. “Our obligation is to protect with our voice and our continuous struggle all those who resist the arbitrariness of power.”
Scotland
By Dale Street

Back in July of this year, a senior aide to SNP First Minister Alex Salmond briefed the media that Salmond “would not object to the term ‘independence-lite’ as a description of what was on offer at next year’s referendum.”

The publication of the SNP government’s White Paper “Scotland’s Future — Your Guide to an Independent Scotland” on 26 November confirmed that.

The Queen will remain Head of State. Scotland will remain a member of the European Union. Scotland will remain a member of Nato. And the pound sterling will remain the currency.

All the BBC’s output will still be screened in Scotland. Passports will still be the same colour and format as British ones (except, obviously, for the word “Scottish” on the cover), and National Lottery tickets will still be on sale, with Scotland receiving its “fair share” of funding.

As Salmond recently put it, his independent Scotland will maintain five of the six existing “unions” with the UK.

The political union, created by the Treaty of Union of 1707, would be ended, but the five other “unions” would remain: European Union, currency union, Union of the Crowns of 1603, defence union (i.e. NATO), and a “social union”.

An example of the “social union” as understood by Salmond, is “People in England will still cheer Andy Murray, and people in Scotland will still support the Lions at rugby.”

The reason for the SNP’s emphasis on how little would change in an independent Scotland is that most people in Scotland don’t want independence.

Opinion polls consistently show a 60% to 40% split against independence amongst those who have a definite opinion, with around 15% of the total electorate undecided.

In order to try to construct a majority for independence, the SNP’s chosen tactic is to argue that life under independence will not be much different from life now.

As numerous political writers have put it, it is an attempt to change the question from “Why independence?” to “Why not independence?”

SMALL

The White Paper argues that, though change through independence will be small, it will all be for the better.

The bedroom tax — mentioned 37 times in the White Paper — will be scrapped. Royal Mail will be renationalised. The National Minimum Wage will increase at least in line with inflation. The state pension age may be lower than in the remainder-UK (RUK).

Trident will be scrapped by 2020. Children aged three and four will be guaranteed 1,140 hours of free childcare. Energy bills will be cut. Pensions and mortgages will be unaffected, and there will be no increase in general taxation.

Corporation tax will be cut by up to 3%. Air Passenger Duty will be cut by 50%, prior to its eventual abolition. A Scottish Broadcasting Service will be set up.

Scots will be £600 a year better off on average, according to the White Paper.

The fact that the White Paper doubles up as an SNP election manifesto — the promise of any or all of these policies would be a matter for the government of an independent Scotland — is another example of how the SNP hopes to win the elections.

The thrust of criticism in the media and from the cross-party Better Together campaign was that the White Paper about independence is just so much voting fodder. Its only role in politics is to counterpose united labour movement mobilisation to the sterility of the current referendum “debate”.

Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond

likely to be dependent on it.

The promise to cut energy bills turns out to be a promise to transfer responsibility for spending on increasing domestic energy efficiency from the power companies to the Scottish government.

Out of the well-known goodness of their hearts, the power companies will then supposedly pass these savings on to consumers by cutting their bills.

An SNP government will scrap the bedroom tax in 2016 — but in the meantime it is failing to provide local authorities with sufficient funds to meet the demand for Discretionary Housing Payments.

POWER

An SNP government will also extend free childcare to three and four-year-olds in 2016 — but the SNP has the power to do that right now.

Questioned about why it was not done so, Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon explained: “If we did that now, then the revenues would flow straight to the UK Treasury rather than staying here in Scotland to help us fund that policy, to help us support that properly. That is why we need the full powers of independence.”

The issue of expanding childcare looms particularly large in the White Paper and its presentation. This is because women are one of the groups most resistant to supporting independence.

The thrust of criticism in the media and from the cross-party Better Together campaign was that the White Paper/SNP election manifesto was a contradictory wish-list in which the sums did not add up.

They had a point. It would not be up to Scotland alone, for example, to decide whether there would be a currency union with the RUK or ongoing membership of the EU.

But the White Paper simply assumes that, despite statements to the contrary from both the UK government and the EU Commission, the rest of the world (plus the BBC and the National Lottery) will carry out the SNP’s policies.

And some weighty academic research has also repeatedly concluded that the SNP’s assumptions about the income of an independent Scotland are unrealistic. The Times, for example, singled out:

“The questionable assumption that between 2011-12 and 2016-17 onshore tax revenues would grow by 23%, a stellar performance compared with the preceding five years, when they grew by only 3%.”

Less than consistently, the SNP argues that a currency union would be “common sense” because economic cycles in Scotland are much the same as in the UK as a whole.

So much for the longstanding SNP argument that independence is needed because Scottish economic cycles diverge from those in the rest of the UK, but Westminster governments adopt policy in response to UK, not Scottish, economic cycles.

But much of the media and Better Together criticism of the White Paper is only a mirror image of the SNP’s politics. The latter predict joy in an independent Scotland, the former predict doom and gloom, but both sets of calculations are speculative.

Neither side in the debate links the issue of Scotland’s constitutional status to basic questions about a root-and-branch attack on the social and economic inequalities and the environmental destruction inherent in all capitalist states.

The best that the SNP can offer is a vision of a lightly “fairer” society, albeit one funded through attracting multinationalities by tax cuts and increased income from non-renewable sources of energy.

The mainstream campaign for a ‘No’ vote does not even go that far.

It does not present the constitutional status quo (or increased devolution, which is what most Scots support) as a ‘better’ way to achieve social change. It runs an essentially conservative effort based on little more than scaremongering.

In theory, the Better Together campaign could argue for the status quo (or increased devolution) on the basis that a Westminster government could use the resources of the larger unit of the British state to redistribute wealth and power in order to create a fairer society.

In fact, because the campaign is an alliance between a latter-day Scottish brand of New Labour, Lib Dems and the Tories, it is inherently incapable of doing that.

Over the next ten months socialists need to intervene in the debate from a class perspective.

For socialists, the “social union” that counts is not one that revolves around tennis players and rugby teams, but the existence of an integrated labour movement based on a free and voluntary association of organised labour in the constituent elements of the UK.

The “social union” which counts is one based on the class interests, values, and political attitudes which are shared by workers in Scotland and the rest of the UK. 63% of people in England agree with the statement “there is one law for the rich and one for the poor”, as do 61% of people in Scotland.

But for both the Yes and No campaigns, the labour movement is just so much voting fodder. Its only role in politics is to be either electorally bribed into a vote for independence-lite or scaremongered into a vote for the status quo.

Long overdue is a campaign which challenges the politics of the mainstream Yes and No campaigns and counterposes united labour movement mobilisation to the sterility of the current referendum “debate”.

BOOKS FROM WORKERS’ LIBERTY

- Antonio Gramsci: working-class revolutionary
  The revolutionary ideas of Antonio Gramsci, leader of the early Italian Communist Party and Marxist theorist. E4 bit.ly/gramsci

- Working-class politics and anarchism
  Debates between members of Workers’ Liberty and comrades from various anarchist traditions. ES. liyur.com/wcanarchism

- Marxist Ideas to Turn the Tide
  Readings and reflections on revolutionary socialist strategy. ES. liyur/m-ideas
Education workers strike for decent pay

By Jonny West
The threat of strikes by teachers in seven secondary schools in Lewisham, south London, has forced school managers to withdraw an unfair pay policy.

The NUT’s national dispute on pay, workload, and pensions, provides a framework for union groups at school or borough level to escalate action in order to “secure an acceptable pay policy”, and the victory in Lewisham shows that, by standing firm, teachers can force concessions from local management.

Schools in Lewisham had wanted to peg teachers’ pay to Oftsted grading of lessons, which the NUT described as “arbitrary and unfair”.

Union activists said that teachers must submit a “mainly paper evidence base” for applications for higher pay grades, which would have substantially added to the degree of bureaucratic paperwork teachers already have to contend with.

The new policy remains performance-linked, but will now be based on progress towards defined appraisal targets within the schools themselves rather than Oftsted criteria. The threat of strikes also forced management to withdraw a stipulation that teachers must submit a “mainly paper evidence base” for applications for higher pay grades, which would have substantially added to the degree of bureaucratic paperwork teachers already have to contend with.

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Egypt: support the left in the “Third Square”!

By Clive Bradley

On 19 November a group called the Revolutionary Front marched through the streets around Tahrir Square in Cairo, shouting slogans against the military government.

In the Square was a crowd gathered in support of the army, which took power at the end of June this year. A confrontation between the two groups resulted, in which the security forces dispersed with tear gas.

Later, with the pro-regime forces now gone, the Revolutionary Front returned to the Square, this time confronting the Central Security Forces directly. Some reports say 40 people were injured.

All this is, for now, a pale echo of the events of January and February 2011 which saw the removal of President Hosni Mubarak, or indeed the enormous presidential elections which Mursi won, have both said that if he does so they will not stand against him. One of these was the open representative of the old regime, so it’s not very surprising; the other is the Nasserist, more radical figure, whose party includes at least one significant representative of the new, independent trade union movement, who is currently Minister of Labour.

The labour movement, which is a vital force in Egypt, has also been divided by the coup, with one of the independent union federations openly calling for an end to strikes and cooperation with the government.

A big test, both of the unions and of the wider democratic movement, will be a new law to make public protests harder to organise. These are difficult times for Egypt, and the outcome is still uncertain. For sure, groups like the Revolutionary Front and the radical organisations which comprise it need and deserve our support and solidarity.

Charges dropped against Bob

By Martin Thomas

Construction company Abigroup, part of the Lend Lease empire, has dropped the charges against Bob Carnegie arising from the Queensland Children’s Hospital construction site dispute in August-October 2012.

In August 2013, Bob was acquitted of “contempt of court” charges, brought on grounds that he disobeyed court orders to keep away from the site during the dispute.

Abigroup said then that it would continue with civil charges against Bob, seeking millions of dollars in damages to compensate for its losses in the dispute.

Now the civil charges have been dropped.

“Together we conquered Goliath! I will see you all wherever workers struggle for a better life.”

• bobcarnegiedefence.wordpress.com

Occupying in solidarity

By Will Greene

As Solidarity goes to press, anti-cuts activists in Birmingham, Liverpool, Sussex, Edinburgh, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Sheffield, and the University of Ulster in Coleraine are in occupation.

This new wave of student occupations was sparked on 20 November by Birmingham Defend Education, the anti-cuts group at the University of Birmingham linked to the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC).

The occupations are in solidarity with the Higher and Further Education strike on 3 December, as well as against fees, cuts, and the general marketisation of higher education, and for local struggles.

The week-long Birmingham occupation was forcibly brought to an end by bailiffs following the defiance of an injunction, but not before Sussex Against Privatisation re-occupied the Brander House Conference Centre as part of their ongoing campaign against the privatisation of services on campus.

The occupations have since spread, as part of a conscious effort by activists to connect local struggles and show solidarity with each other and with workers’ struggles on campus. Birmingham Defend Education have now re-occupied the University’s Senate Chamber following a demonstration on the campus in support of the Higher Education strike.

In the last few years, there have been many inspiring local actions. However, this is the largest simultaneous wave of student occupations since the autumn of 2010. It is likely to inspire more action this week. The NCAFC has put a call-out for further occupations around the demands for democratic institutions and public education, solidarity with workers’ struggles, and against the privatisation of student loan debt. More: anticuts.com