Solidarity
For social ownership of the banks and industry

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Floods show profit system will wreck our future

RENEWABLE ENERGY NOW!

See page 5
French law hurts sex workers

By Rosalind Robson

In December 2013 French MPs voted for new laws to make the buying of sexual services a criminal offence, to be subject to a minimum fine of 1,500€.

The new law, which is still to be passed by the French Senate, is based on the so-called “Nordic model” (i.e. originating in Sweden), where clients rather than sex workers are heavily penalised and where sex work remains, in theory, legal. The policy is aimed at abolishing sex work altogether.

In France migrant sex workers who “give up” sex work are given exceptional “leave to remain” in France. They will also get 336€ a month.

The architects of the French law (including the Women’s Rights Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem) say they want to disrupt foreign “pumping networks”. They claim 80-90% of France’s sex workers are migrants; they strongly imply all migrant sex workers are victims of trafficking rings.

They argue any sex worker who opposes the laws (who have been many protests) are an “elite” who do not suffer the terrible slave-like conditions of migrant sex workers.

The abolitionists in France, as indeed everywhere, say there are human rights activists, as well as feminists.

The counter-argument (including from sex-worker worker, and perhaps more specific protections, but that is an issue one accept that trafficked migrant sex workers consent to the work?

The problem is that the reality and meaning of “trafficking” is highly contentious. On a conscientious 2008 academic study concludes, “Accurate data on the extent of trafficking in human beings does not exist.”

The figure bandied about by French politicians of 90% is based on UN estimates which are unverified and unverifiable. There are many reasons why it is difficult to find an accurate picture of numbers of “illegal” migrant workers, including sex workers.

Migrants in sex work who come into contact with authority may “under-report” their situation (or be afraid of reprisal) or “over-report” their situation (to gain some leverage in the system).

It is also difficult to separate out people who have been “smuggled” by individuals or “gangs” into another country because they want to, or at least knowing that they will be engaged in sex work and people who have been “trafficked”, that is, forced into sex work.

Forced sex work should indeed be outlawed, but that should be done using appropriate laws, not ones aimed at all migrant sex workers.

There are many grey areas. Migrants rely on forced sex work to get from one country to another — that is the reality of modern migration. Conditions for migrant sex work can be appalling, that is the reality of a lot of sex work. But neither of these realities cancel out, or should be used to deny the consent of sex workers.

The realities demand legal protections — not all coercion, including state coercion of threat of deportation and the right to work in a safe environment.

The French government’s answer of simultaneously cracking down on migration and “stamping out” all prostitution is both utopian and dangerous.

It can, because as long as we live in a fundamentally unequal world that pushes people to migrate. Whist we fight for economic justice everywhere, we cannot, and we should not deny people the right to move to a “better life”.

We may be appalled at their lack of choice — that this means working for cumming jobs, standing on a street corner selling pirate DVDs, and selling sexual services on the internet — but all of these choices are essentially the same from the point of view of migrants.

Dangerous because “stigmatising” migrants in general and sex workers in particular as these laws do (despite the charitable concern of the legislators) will lead to bad conditions, a green light for exploiters and malign individuals to beat up sex workers, or worse.

The policy itself will lead to sex workers and clients going to less accessible and more dangerous places.

- Syndicat du Travail Sexuel strains-syndicat.org;
- www.lauraagustin.com;
- www.stalkproject.net

Tsipras to Europe? Italian left to... where?

By Hugh Edwards

On Friday 7 February, Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras spoke in Rome.

In the little Teatro Valle, Rome’s oldest theatre, under occupation for the last two and a half years, he addressed a packed crowd in response to the invitation from a section of the Italian left to nominate him as presidential candidate in the forthcoming European elections. He has already accepted similar nominations from other sections of the left in Europe.

On the basis of an article written in support by Toni Negri, an Italian intellectual once imprisoned for “political crimes”, right-wing Greek prime minister Antonis Samaras has claimed that anyone who stands for office with such support osmotically absorbs the previous “guilty” of Negri. He has called for Tsipras to be prosecuted. But, apart from those occupying the audience in Rome was mostly people in their 50s, many past veterans and longsuffering footsoldiers of one retreat after another. And for many in the audience, and certainly all their leaders, the struggles in Greece have little relevance.

For them the “sensitive” revolt of the Greeks reflects the unique conditions imposed by Europe’s leaders, especially Germany (the demonisation of Germany is another trope much in vogue), not the general need for battle against capital.

Alessis Tsipras’ stirring call from the platform for the masses of Europe to unite as one against their oppressors received huge applause.

But the masses in Italy are now weak, divided and disillusioned, prey to the populist, racist blandishments of Grillo and worse, because of the squallid compromises of the left leaders.
Collins: oppose the 2019 plan!

By Colin Foster

It is, sadly, a traditional approach of trade union leaders to accept bad proposals without a fight because they are pleased with the adroit negotiation which made the proposals not as bad as they might have been, and they think that further “boxing clever” can curtail the remaining evils.

It looks as if most union leaders will do that with the Collins proposals on Labour Party structure, which go to a two-hour Labour Party special conference at the Excel Centre in London on 1 March.

The Unite union Executive meets on 13 February to decide its attitude. Unite general secretary Len McCluskey has made his attitude clear by ensuring that the two Unite full-time officials on Labour’s Executive voted for the proposals on 4 February. The Unite lay rep on the Labour Executive, Martin Mayer, abstained but has made it clear he does not like the proposals.

Other union leaders have let reports that they back the proposals go uncommented.

Local Labour Party delegates, and as many unions as possible, should still vote against the proposals on 1 March, if only to lay down a marker for the battles between now and 2019 and to make a principle.

The principle is that no one should vote for a far-reaching package like Collins’s unless they are positively convinced that it is good, and that they have had adequate space to consider, debate, and amend the package.

In fact the Labour leaders have planned 1 March as a

Privatising the pension?

Leaked Whitehall documents have revealed that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is considering saving money by privatising the delivery of the state pension.

The government currently runs 10 pension centres in England, Wales and Scotland, including in Newcastle, Swindon and Dundee, which are expected to administer nearly £90bn of pensions, pension credits and other pensioner benefits.

But the review even considers whether the DWP’s bereavement service for those reporting deaths and terminating benefit payments would be run more efficiently if outsourced.

Leveson, 647 and Serco, two of the main firms which do such contracted-out work, have been investigated by the Serious Fraud Office (SFO), after an audit found that they were overcharging taxpayers for tagging criminals who were in fact dead, in jail, or abroad.

Coronation

“coronation” for the package. Moves are afoot to seek a vote in parts on the package, but that will take a struggle. Scope for amendments? None.

The evil in Collins is not so much in what it proposes immediately (though that includes bad things) as in its projection for 2019:

“After a transitional period of five years, affiliation fees shall only be accepted on behalf of levy payers who have consented to the payment of such fees. At that point, the scale of a trade union’s collective affiliation shall be governed by the number of levy payers who have consented to the payment of affiliation fees.”

That reads bland and technical, but it is not. The gist is the very opposite of the blather about building for the future of the Labour Party and the unions' representation at Labour conference and in Labour committees.

Such reduction will increase the overweighting in the Labour Party of professional politicians, advisers, researchers, think-tankers, and their business-people friends.

It will firm up the characteristics of the Labour Party that shape the leaders’ current policies for continued pay freezes and cuts after 2015, and a feeble fight against the Tories.

Rumour has it that Unite will reduce its formal Labour-affiliation numbers so as to gain leverage for reducing the unions’ representation at Labour conference and in Labour committees.

So the battle must continue. Only two rule changes are to be voted on 1 March. Properly, the proposed shift in 2019 should require a further rule change.

Some Labour Party insiders warn that the leadership may try to make the shift without a rule change, but that can and should be contested.

• defendthelink.wordpress.com
• Collins text: bit.ly/14collins

NEW UNIONISM 2014

An activist conference 29 March 11am-5pm University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1 7HY

This conference will seek to learn from experiences of organising the unorganised 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, organising in the private sector, outsourcing, fighting in bureaucratised trade unions vs “revolutionary unionism”, approaches to working-class politics and much more.

daniel.cooper@ulu.lon.ac.uk
07840 136 728
www.workeraliberty.org/newunions

Celebrate? Protest!

By Clare Richards

The third National Libraries Day took place on Saturday 8 February.

Local libraries held celebrations which included author readings, poetry sessions, business advice, classes and children’s story-telling.

As a library worker and avid borrower who got my first library card as a toddler, I love to see libraries being celebrated, but I was not in the party mood for a “coronation”.

Cuts to local government funding have hit local libraries hard. A total of 439 libraries closed in the first three years of the Coalition government. In the same period nearly 400 full-time equivalent jobs have been lost from the sector.

In 2014-15 budgets, 10% of libraries are currently under threat.

Using libraries improves children’s literacy and life chances; story and rhyme times provide vital support for new parents, improving their mental health.

Libraries provide free internet access to the 25% of the population who do not have the internet at home; libraries provide access to benefits and housing advice; libraries help people find work; libraries give homeless people a place to keep warm.

Libraries give people isolated because of mental and physical health problems a chance for interaction and advice. For some people they are the only chance in a day to have a conversation.

As universal spaces, libraries bring communities together and improve community cohesion; libraries save money in reducing pressure on other services and increasing employment chances for people who use them.

We need to fight for our libraries because they give us access to reading, and whether you can afford them or not everybody people should have a right to books. Reading is exciting. You learn things you didn’t know before, you go places and feel things outside of your life experiences.

Through stories children learn empathy and practise bravery, wisdom and friendship through their favourite characters.

Through fiction and non-fiction books we learn that things can be different, the world has not always been as it is now and we can change it.

National Libraries Day came out of Save Libraries Day; a day of protest against cuts and closures in services nationally.

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The SWP’s five three-quarter truths

The Left
By Martin Thomas

Five three-quarter truths, piled one on top of another to reach a conclusion, make a conclusion which is only three-quarters times three-quarters times... true. Or 24% true. Or three-quarters false.

Example: the SWP’s current argument on “work, class, and resistance” developed in a day school sponsored by the SWP’s International Socialist journal on London on 8 Feb.

The SWP enunciates five three-quarter truths:
1. The working class is a whole. It is not two separate segments with a wall between. There is no separate “precarious” class.
2. Public service workers are part of the working class.
3. Only strong industrial action like strikes can win.
4. One-day strikes by public service workers’ unions on issues like pay and pensions rally workers and make them more resistant to take and defend the condition of the SWP, the SWP strives to keep alliances with and nudging of left union officials. (*).
5. Present few workers are confident to wage big strikes unless the union officials back them. The union officials make a difference. Not all union officials are the same. Pushing left-wing union officials, as important.

Conclusion (three-quarters false): the “strategy” of building “Unite the Resistance” is correct.

UTR is the latest SWP trade union enterprise, the successor to the once ballyhooed, now forgotten Right to Work and Organise for Fighting Unions. Essentially it consists of a series of conferences and meetings where SWP speakers share platforms with left union officials who are on relatively good terms with the SWP, and they join in calling for “more action” (which comes down to: more one-day strikes without planning sequel).

At the day school, SWP left union officials support SWP initiatives such as the rally for UN anti-racism day on 22 March, then the SWP strives to keep the unions to wage one-day strikes, and then notionally converts it into an indefinite general strike by speculating about workers staying out on following days. SWP speakers rebuked disputants from RS21 (the latest SWP split-off) who argued that the SWP ends up over-valuing alliances with and nudging of left union officials. (*)

Paul McGarr argued that even when you are against left union officials on industrial issues you must be “with” them on others such as racism. I decode this as saying that if left union officials will support SWP initiatives such as the rally for UN anti-racism day on 22 March, then the SWP strives to keep “in” with them whatever they do on industrial issues. The SWP has a bad record of such attitudes.

The trade union strategy here may have some link with the SWP’s bureaucratic botching of its response to complaints by women members of sexual abuse by its former national secretary Martin Smith, a botching which triggered the conflicts leading to the recent split-offs from the SWP (ISN in spring 2013, RS21 in December 2013). The SWP leadership was so defensive about Smith, so it is said, because they valued his supposedly exceptional ability to schmooze left union officials.

Implausibly (and oddly: I’d never heard the claim before), SWP speakers claimed the 30 November 2011 one-day strike on public sector pensions as (at least in large part) their own achievement, the product of a “convergence between the party and some left officials” possible only because of the caniness of SWP policy.

SWP speakers declared their perspective as a sort of golden mean. On the one hand, there are Counterfire and the People’s Assembly, “cheerleaders for the left bureaucracy”. On the other, there are the more recent SWP split-offs, which SWP speakers presented as arguing that neo-liberalism has rotted the soul of the working class (Richard Seymour), offering vague enthusiasm about the “precaritak” as a magic bypass for the difficulties in the labour movement (other LSPers), or seeing breach away unions as a whole.

In the middle, the SWP, with the golden mean.

Again, SWP speakers Alex Callinicos and Paul McGarr presented the alluring idea of assessing the working class as either “everything has changed” (allegedly the recent SWP split-offs’ view) or “nothing has changed”, not just those which the left officials have selected as suitable for one-day strikes; around a battle to democratise the trade unions and remake trade union organisation from the rank and file upwards.

At the day school Phil Taylor gave a barnstorming presentation on performance management. He concluded with a valuable list of ideas on how to fight it in detail. SWPers in the floor discussion that followed mostly (not all) contented themselves with bluster (“just say no!”) or with the thought that good one-day strikes over pay (or, as happens with the PCS and the NUT, catch-all demands for the government to negotiate about all issues) would make workers more confident when facing management.

Lucia Pradella said that precariousness and poverty are structural to capitalism, and affect the whole working class. Socialists should work for a collective, unifying response.

However, we need “a realistic consideration of the factors which divide the working class”. In Italy, she said, the “precaritak” debate is an old one. Ten years ago, or so, there were many activists who said that they were organising the precarious and did not want to work with the unions. Now “everyone is precarious”, and debate has faded.

But the left still remains: “the unions did nothing to organise the precarious workers”, nor even much to combat the pressures and tactics imposing precariousness on the bulk of the working class.

* One of the SWP’s defences was that they had backed Jerry Hicks for Unite general secretary against Len McCluskey.

Though Hicks’s personal sincerity and personal record are estimable, we do not think that Hicks, and the molotov crew around him, represented any better programme for Unite than McCluskey. On the whole, I doubt that the SWP would have voted Hicks if McCluskey were willing to speak at SWP-sponsored events, instead of giving favour unilaterally to the People’s Assembly initiated by Counterfire, another SWP splinter.

Elsewhere, for example in the NUT, the SWP is not really more distant from the left officials than Counterfire is.

New book rediscovers US socialist cartoons

The cartoons collected in a new book depict US politics, workers’ struggles, America’s Jim Crow racism, Roosevelt’s “New Deal” and Harry Truman’s “Fair Deal”, and Stalinism in its era of greatest prestige and triumph, as revolutionary socialists saw them at the time.

You can buy online here - price includes postage and packing.

Send your order to (£10.90 worldwide)

http://www.workersliberty.org/socialistcartoons

https://www.facebook.com/socialistcartoons
Renewable energy now!

Behind the issues about flood defences and dredging, the current floods point to a bigger and global question. If we plan a big shift away from fossil fuels, global warming will make events like these floods, and on a much bigger scale, more and more common. They are likely to escalate to levels which will make human life on earth difficult or even impossible in its present mode — and which, before they do that, will create great pressures for wars, crises, and mass population movements. Many islands and coastal regions will disappear under the sea. Water supplies and agriculture will be disrupted.

Yet the big shift in energy production now is towards increasing extraction of fossil fuels through carbon-spewing techniques like fracking.

Wind, solar, and tidal power, and “carbon capture and storage”, are getting relatively little research and development. Even less is being done to reorganise buildings, cities, transport, and work patterns so as to reduce carbon emissions.

Corporations can make more profit, quicker, by expanding fracking, by selling more gas-guzzler cars, and by promoting carbon-spewing industries. Since 2009, when the Copenhagen summit failed, governments have retreated on “green” policies. Each government says that global capitalist competition makes it uneconomic to be more “green”.

The profit priority blocks the development of nuclear power too. Despite the real problems with nuclear power, we in Workers’ Liberty have concluded that the urgency of reducing carbon emissions makes it wrong to rule out nuclear power as a technology for “base load” power (power when the wind isn’t blowing, the sun isn’t shining, etc.). Nuclear power requires large investments and long-term planning. Those are necessary, but being blocked by capitalist preferences for techniques which bring bigger profits quicker.

A system driven by competitive struggle between capitalist owners for who can make most profit, quickest, cannot sustain a plan to save the planet.

A plan which enables humanity to live in balance with the globe and other species, and with proper regard for the future, can be achieved only by democratic control of economic life — only by the working class organising to take production out of the hands of the profiteers.

Plan for people and environment

The recent extensive flooding, with worse still predicted, has brought into question the policies of the Environment Agency and dragged questions such as those around climate change and agricultural land management into the public eye.

Flooding has caused extensive damage and personal loss in large sections of the south of England. However, despite this being the main coverage on the news, this is not just restricted to the Somerset Levels. Unusual weather patterns have caused extensive damage to coastal areas all along the south coast, and over the past few years flooding has become an increasing problem in areas of Wales, Hebden Bridge (2012 and 2013), and along the river Severn in Herefordshire and Worcestershire to name but a few.

Ironic then that the minister whose department holds the remit for preparing the UK for the effects of climate change, such as increased flooding, is a known climate change skeptic. Owen Paterson has come under fire in the media for his lack of action on dredging, and his lack of visits to areas affected by flooding, but very little seems to be aimed his way to criticise him for his skepticism over climate change. The government has also been under attack for the cuts to funding in the environment agency, with a 12% cut to budgets for flood defences in the coming year it is difficult to see how increased flood defences could be put in place.

Conscious government policy over the past 30 years on agriculture and land use has drastically changed the British countryside and affected its ability to cope with heavy rain. The trend has been to large scale, industrial, farming where trees and shrub land are cleared for larger and larger farming fields. With large subsidies from the government for this land clearance and to large farming businesses, this process has been driven forward quickly. This reduces the ability of land to soak up excess water, causing water to run through the landscape to where it causes problems. Large subsidies have also been available for clearing hillside land for farming, which allows water to run straight off hillsides into valleys, causing increased flooding. That is not to say that a return to multiple, small scale, farms is necessarily a desirable thing. Neither is it to say that human intervention to shape the landscape around us is necessarily a bad thing. It largely depends whose interests are driving it.

Added to the change of agricultural land use, is the increasing trend for building on flood plains. Figures obtained by The Independent on Sunday* show that last year local councils allowed at least 87 planning developments involving 560 homes to proceed in England and Wales in areas with a high risk of flooding. Over the past decade many building regulations have been relaxed or simply not been stringent enough in the first place, allowing the construction industry to make more profit by building on flood plains.

Flood prevention and defence is going to be an increasing issue not only with changing weather patterns but with predicted sea level rises. This requires integrated and collective thinking. Currently many flood barriers protect economically important areas or simply areas where richer people live, to the detriment of poorer areas downstream.

It requires planned programs to plant trees and convert certain areas of land into natural flood barriers, therefore investing money to the benefit of the majority, despite and against the priorities of capitalism. 1. www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/the-more-the-experts-warn-against-the-more-we-build-on-flood-plains-9101710.html

* We need a massive shift away from fossil fuels, not a shift towards fracking!

Help us raise £12,000 by October

One of the roles of a revolutionary organisation is to retain the memory of past political struggles, and to study the debates and ideas from the history of our movement.

Workers’ Liberty maintains an extensive archive of articles and documents, pamphlets and polemics.

Recently, we have been OCRing and uploading to our website a series of May Day specials from Labor Action, the newspaper of the US Workers’ Party/ISL tendency that pioneered the development of a distinctive “Third Camp” socialism.

In order to carry on doing this important work and more, we need money!

We want to raise £12,000 by our AGM in October 2014

• You can set up a regular payment from your bank to: AWL, sort code: 08-60-01, account: 20047674, Unity Trust Bank, Nine Brindleyplace, Birmingham, B1 2BH.

• Or send a cheque to us at the address below (cheques payable to “AWL”).

• Or donate online at workersliberty.org/payment.

• Take copies of Solidarity to sell at your workplace, university/college, or campaign group, or organise a fundraising event. And get in touch to discuss joining the AWL!

More information: 07796 690 874 / awl@workersliberty.org / AWL, 20E Tower Workshops, 58 Riley Road, London SE1 3DG.

This week we have raised just £50 in donations (Thanks to Matt and Christine).

Solidarity will skip a week on 19 February, in order to produce a booklet on the 1984-5 miners’ strike. Solidarity 314 will be out on 26 February.
The PPP fiasco

In 2003, the Labour government imposed its “Public-Private Partnership” policy on London Underground, in the face of huge public opposition, trade union resistance, and mountains of rational criticism of the policy.

After four years of derailments, cook-ups, late starts to the train service as engineering works overran, the PPP began to fall apart, as Metronet – one of the private infrastructure companies (InfraCo) – went into administration. The other, Tube Lines, would follow it back into public ownership three years later, spelling the end of the PPP.

This extract from Janette Boone’s book, Plundering London Underground: the labour, private finance and public service 1997-2010, gives shocking figures as to the cost of this disastrous policy to the public.

At first, no-one seemed able to figure the cost of Metronet’s collapse. None of the many witnesses to the Transport Select Committee would name the price, and London Underground Ltd’s Tim O’Toole warned that “I cannot sit here looking at a catastrophe of this dimension and say, “Don’t worry, it is not going to cost anyone anything.”

Six months after Metronet went into administration, Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly was still “uncertain” as to the cost of failure and how much of the tab would be picked up by tax-payers and fare-payers. Eventually figures came out. The direct loss to the public purse of Metronet’s failure was between £170 million and £410 million. But there was much more. Transport for London was liable for 95% of Metronet’s debts, so the government gave £1.7 billion to the InfraCo’s lenders as part of TIL’s funding settlement in 2008.

Metronet’s collapse meant that LUL’s legal bill for 2008 was £203.3 million, many times greater than a more typical year, for example £43.1 million for 2005. The cost to LUL and TIL of running Metronet’s business during administration was £13 million per week, with TIL advancing £900 million to Ernst and Young LLP. As well as money lost, there was money wasted. TIL paid £1.2 billion for station renovations that Metronet had not carried out. The National Audit Office reckoned that the cost of the debt re-payment and loss to tax-payers amounted to up to 10% of the work actually delivered.

Who should foot the bill? London TravelWatch – the independent, statutory watchdog for passengers – argued that Metronet’s shareholder companies should pay for the losses and the government should fund the extra Arbiter charges. GLA Transport Committee Chair Roger Evans argued that, “because this was imposed on London then the Government that imposed it should be the people who pick the bill up”. Mayor Ken Livingstone agreed, and briefed his publicity machine accordingly, telling staff that “no-one was to say ‘we told you so’. Journalists pressed me to denounce [Gordon] Brown but I just draped on about ‘working together to solve the problem’.

Metronet’s shareholder companies lost only their stake of £70 million each, a sum that MPs called “relatively mod-

Notes
3. BBC News website, 6 February 2008.
10. TIL, list of contracts, 28 June 2012, LUL awarded the contract for the SEL signalling upgrade to Bombardier Ltd.
The stalls cuts plans

Defend Mark Harding!

Mark Harding, secretary of the Hammersmith & City branch of the RMT, is being victimised for his union activities.

He was outrageously arrested on a picket line by Hammersmith police after a strikebreaking staff member got upset at being asked not to cross a picket line.

Mark’s bail conditions prevent him from “being involved in RMT or any other union associated with LU/LT/TFL or to be in attendance at any organised industrial action”. The arrest and the bail conditions are part of an ongoing attack on basic democratic rights. [Defend Mark Harding, drop the charges!]

facebook.com/defendmarkharding

Picket Lines

King’s Cross

At King’s Cross on 5 February, Workers’ Liberty members visited the picket lines to show solidarity with striking RMT and TSSA members. We distributed Tubeworker, which was well-received by the workers, and gave away a couple of papers.

The workers were confident about the action so far, and were clear that the first 48 hours had to be solid for the strike to maintain momentum. They were receptive to Tubeworker’s proposals for branches to establish strike funds, and interested to hear about how strike funds were operated by the 3 Cosas Campaign during the recent strikes at the University of London.

One worker told Solidarity: “I’ve only seen one member of staff go into King’s Cross, so it’s a good turnout and we’re happy with that. All our members have stood strong and united, and hopefully if our train drivers do the same we should get our message across today.”

Micheál MacEoin

Brixton and Elephant & Castle

I visited Brixton and Elephant & Castle picket lines. They were both pretty big and lively.

Brixton had six people from my union branch there, as well as TSSA and RMT strikers. Management had pulled out all the stops to get the station open earlier, but they had obviously been a bit taken aback by how strong the strike was. Strikers were angry that management eventually got the station open, and obviously at the ASLEF scabs.

Elephant and Castle was a jolly picket, as ever. They’d turned back a few people back, and were upbeat about the strength of the strike, particularly in signalling. I spoke to union activists about doing some community direct action around the next strikes.

Lucy Monette

A striker at north west London picket spoke to Solidarity: “The first day of the strike was incredibly solid on the one hand. Essentially it didn’t run at all, despite management’s promise of a skeleton service. On the second day, a few more drivers and service control staff came in which meant management could run some level of service, but only seven stations were open.

“There’s been some flak from passers-by, but on the whole the public are supportive. People know that this is a strike for the future of the service.

“Reports from all over are that the picket lines for this strike have mobilised people well beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Those new people and their energy need to find expression in the direction of the dispute. The strike committee needs to be broadened out to be more democratic and representative, so it can actually get in the driving seat for this dispute and take control of where it’s heading.

“There’s some nervousness about the possibility of sustained action. Some people are saying ‘well, there’s the next two days coming up – then what? How many more days’ pay will I need to lose before we win something?’ Obviously you want to fight that kind of thinking, but in this economic climate it’s not hard to understand why people think that way.

“There’s always been a bit of coolness in the RMT towards the idea of strike pay, but if we’re going to enable people, particularly part-time and lower-paid workers, to take the kind of sustained action that might be needed to win this fight, it’s something that’s going to be absolutely essential.”

Class Struggle

London Underground workers’ 4-6 February strike to stop job losses and ticket office closures was solid, highly effective, and popular amongst working-class Londoners.

London Underground bosses’ promises to run a guaranteed service on certain lines were left in tatters, as the strike proved far stronger than management, and perhaps some in the RMT and TSSA unions, were expecting.

Management strikebreaking threatened safety throughout the strike. With the strike less than an hour old, a strikebreaking manager routed two trains to near collision at the Northumberland Park depot. Elsewhere, Stratford station had to be evacuated as the skeleton crew of a handful of scabbing station staff, partially-trained casual workers, and managers dragged out from behind their desks to work frontline jobs for the first time in years simply could not deal with the crowds.

Strikers reported bigger, livelier, and better-supported picket lines than have been seen for years, with workers from well beyond the ranks of the “usual suspects” supporting the strikes and turning up to picket.

Despite the anti-strike narrative of the right-wing media, public support for the strike was strong. Passengers understood that the strike was about the future of the Tube, not just workers’ economic conditions. The University of London Union, University College London Union, and the Students Union of the University of Arts London all organised solidarity actions, and disabled activists held a central London protest in support of the strike.

TUBE unions RMT and TSSA followed up the strike with a “revenue duties” (selling and checking tickets) and, where safe, opened the gates to allow passengers to travel free for certain times during the day.

In response to the strike, the Tories have renewed their push for new anti-union laws. They say they will consider putting commitments to further clampdowns on unions’ rights in their manifesto for the 2015 general election. Options under consideration include imposing a “minimum service” agreement on London Underground, as well as changing balloting law to require strike ballots to return an absolute majority, rather than simply a majority of those voting, to be considered legal mandates for strikes. The right-wing clamour for new state repression of unions’ already weakened activities is being driven by opposition to the workers’ highly effective, and popular amongst working-class claims for a proper station staff and ticket offices, using the “station-by-station review” as an opportunity to get service users to demand their ticket offices stay open.

Every workplace must be visited and every member of staff talked to, systematically, and union branches to carry on meeting as often as they have been over the last six weeks. Branches should build hardship funds to sustain serious action in April, and the national unions should make their dispute funds available.

The RMT should also bring other TIL companies into dispute, particularly Tube Lines, where management have revealed their intention to pay for equal pensions and passes with job cuts.

The suspension of the action is not a sell out, but whether it has bought unions time to push for greater concessions from management depends very much on what unions do now.

The stakes remain high, and victory remains possible.
When Rana Plaza, a multistorey building housing garment factories, collapsed in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka in April 2013 the focus of the world media was on the conditions of Bangladeshi workers. It seemed that a turning point might be reached in their fight for rights. But a new investigation by ITV journalists, featuring the campaigning NGO Labour Behind the Label, has shown that much has changed for the better.

This programme two young women workers wearing hidden cameras went to work in two fairly typical garment factories, making clothes for Western companies. The women filmed very young women and girls — some as young as 13 — working longer than the legal working day, with no days off, in hot conditions, being slapped, kicked and insulted by supervisors when they could not keep up with the workload.

In Bangladesh, under-18s should work no more than five hours a day, and 14 is the minimum age for legal work, but in the film all of the workers are forced to work for 11 hours. The worker’s basic pay is just £30 a month.

The Tazreen factory, outside Dhaka, killed 117 workers in November 2012. After Tazreen, health and safety inspections directly linked to the bedroom tax. The investigation also found fire doors padlocked shut: hundreds of Bangladeshi workers have burned to death in factories without emergency exits. A fire at the Tazreen Fashion factory in November 2012 killed at least 117 people. After Tazreen, health and safety inspections were tightened up, but the film showed that in this area too, so far, little has changed for the better.

There is some hope for improvement in the future: in the aftermath of Rana Plaza a number of brands signed up to a legally binding agreement called the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, which gives a role to workers’ representatives and will set out a programme of inspecting and improving safety standards in more than 1,000 Bangladeshi factories.

Walmart and a number of other US brands have not joined it, however, and have put forward a weaker alternative scheme that does not include workers’ representatives.

The programme showed the factory managers coaching workers in what to say in anticipation of a visit by a potential Western buyer. Workers were told to say that they worked no more than the legal maximum number of hours, and that they had received the required health and safety training. They also have to lie about their age and to say that they are old enough to work long hours in the factory — when it is clear that they are not. But scrutiny of the industry is so rare that such coaching is scarcely ever necessary.

This film graphically illustrates that all of the codes of conduct in the world — and most clothes brands now have them — are worth nothing unless the workers on the ground are in a position to fight for their own welfare — unless they are organised!

Labour councils and bedroom tax

By Tom Harris

On 10 February, Channel 4 screened a ‘Dispatches’ documentary on “bedroom tax”.

Many Labour councillors appeared on the programme defending the Government’s measures. Some of them even detailed how they were doing the bare minimum required of them by law to implement them. Our main priority is to protect our tenants, they said. The Labour Party has pledged to scrap the tax on coming to power.

The pledge has encouraged councils not to evict tenants in arrears because of the bedroom tax. Quite a few councils have said they will try to avoid evicting. Though the pledges have loopholes, in fact there have been few evictions directly linked to the bedroom tax.

If Labour councils are serious about opposing the bedroom tax they should disrupt it more aggressively by re-classifying and opening declaring that they will not evict. The “tax” cuts housing benefit for a tenant who has a “spare bedroom” by 14% (or 25% for two “spare” rooms).

The documentary was rather pained in its attempts to appear even-handed. Whenever we learnt of some injustice inflicted by the bedroom tax, we were solemnly reminded that, nevertheless, public spending on benefits had to be brought down somehow another.

But the programme clearly demonstrated the cruelty, as well as the futility, of the bedroom tax.

Cruefully in the way that a disabled couple had to leave the house that had been specially adjusted to meet their mobility needs, because they needed a second spare room to keep their wheelchair in.

Cruefully in the way that families from different areas were forced to scramble around trying to swap houses with another so as to avoid a cut in their benefit.

And in a grim irony, the documentary pointed out that the bedroom tax barely even saves money — the money saved in reduced benefit is wiped out by the money spent by councils trying to re-home people forced to up sticks.

Labour Behind the Label and the National Union of Students have said that the factories making genuine Lee Cooper jeans will be organised! Labour councils and bedroom tax

By Tom Harris

End sweatshops — Support Bangladeshi workers!

Vicki Morris reviews ‘Exposure: Fashion Factories Uncov- ered’ (ITV, 6 February 2014)

Many years people think that Bangladeshi workers toil in terrible conditions because Western shoppers want cheap clothes. The arithmetic is false.

Research by the TUC published in May 2013, after Rana Plaza, showed that doubling the wages paid to Bangladeshi workers would result in the price of a t-shirt going up by just 2p. Commenting, the TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady said: “It isn’t UK consumers — trying to make their wages stretch further as their living standards are hit — who are to blame but big order coming in. Workers in Bangladesh are being paid a sub-standard, sub-poverty wage.”

“Wages paid out to the thousands of women who work in the clothing factories are just a tiny fraction of the end price we pay at the till.”

“End sweatshops — support Bangladeshi workers!”

FEATURE

Cheaper clothes and higher wages

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“End sweatshops — support Bangladeshi workers!”

SOLIDARITY, NOT BOYCOTTS

Perhaps Lee Cooper is a little more ethical than the pi-rate manufacturers (it’s doubtful) but if we want to see the end of sweatshops we will not change much by swapping or boycotting certain brands.

Our concern should not be for brand reputation! It is for the workers in the industry, whoever they are producing for. All the companies, whether premium or shoddy, will get away with whatever they can get away with. The industry as a whole turns a blind eye to sub-contractors who will themselves sub-contract to less regulated factories when a big order comes in.

How we can help is by supporting the workers in the industry to organise to fight for better wages and working conditions. It will not be easy; unions such as the National Garment Workers Federation important work, but, according to IndistriALL, a global union federation for textile and garment workers, less than one percent of garment workers in Bangladesh are represented by a union.

But workers can make gains. At the end of 2013 Bangladeshi workers won a 77% increase in the minimum wage (one of the lowest in the world) which will rise to £3,500 taking into account the cost of living, but a wave of protests demanding an even higher increase (8,114 takas, a 170% increase) is this type of workers’ action that we must support if we want to help end sweatshops. Ultimately, workers should control the industry, take it out of the hands of the exploiting minority that own and run it at the moment. In the future, the majority that own and run it will have to do without their fat profits earned from the blood, sweat and tears of men, women — and children — slaving in deathtrap factories.

End sweatshops — support Bangladeshi workers!
This book contains many good things — an assessment of the nature of capitalism that has developed in China over the last two decades; analysis of the burgeoning Chinese working class; and vivid descriptions of recent workers' struggles. However these fine efforts are spoiled by its treatment of the Maoist period, which is falsely characterised as some kind of worker's state.

Au Loong Yu’s political economy of the current Chinese social formation is broadly correct. He defines China as “bureaucratic capitalism”, a term first used ironically by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 1940s to depict the kind of capitalism that the nationalistic Guomindang had created.

Au Loong Yu argues that bureaucratic capitalism is most appropriate for China because “it captures the most important feature of China's capitalism: the central role of the bureaucracy”. Chinese bureaucrats are “simultaneously entitled to a salary (plus benefits) and a share of the surplus value... Bureaucratic capitalists monopolise the most profitable sectors of the national economy and become the core group of the new bourgeoisie”. However he also accepts bureaucratic capitalism is “still a type of state capitalism”.

China’s rulers and their state began to turn towards capitalism in 1978. Au Loong Yu argues that the class character of the state began to change in 1988, when the CCP amended the constitution, legalising private enterprises and the sale of land and property. Capitalism was decisively restored from 1992 onward. In 1992 by Deng Xiaoping marked the “great leap forward to capitalism” in the social and economic arena.

China started waves of privatisation in 1998 when the CCP announced the “seize the big and let go of the small” policy, under which it would simply sell off the small state-owned enterprises (SOEs). In fact many medium-sized enterprises were privatised. The most significant result of this privatisation resulted in a great shrinkage of the state sector, from 80% in 1979 to one third of industrial output. By 2001, 86% of state industrial enterprises had been restructured, and 70% had either been partially or fully privatised.

**BEST**

One of the best elements of the book is its emphasis on the working classes and limits to economic growth, which is often forgotten by many on the left eager to welcome a rival to US hegemony.

Bruno Jetin refers to IMF data using current exchange rates, which estimates that China’s GDP in five years’ time will still be 35% below the US, although twice the size of the Japanese economy and three times the size of the German economy. US GDP per capita in purchasing power terms (PTP) in 2011 was almost 6 to 1 compared with China, although the difference could narrow to 4 to 1 over the next decade.

Although China is the recipient of huge amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI), its own outflowing FDI is much smaller — while expanding fast. It is currently behind a dozen developed countries but is top amongst developing countries. The export drive has enabled China to accumulate a huge amount of foreign reserves. It is estimated that China’s recent history began when Honda workers in Guangdong took action, calling for higher wages and, perhaps more significantly, the reorganisation of their workplace trade union. This triggered a wave of strike action by workers in foreign-owned car plants that summer. More than 50% of those who took part in the 1989 democracy movement — in fact most of them probably do not know of the event at all because of censorship — and who are prepared to fight to improve conditions at their own workplace.

The book is rightly highly critical of the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), China’s union body — in reality a labour front tied to the state. Bai Ruixue describes how the Tengpunk, who led the 1949 revolution and establised and became China’s sole trade union organisation (it was temporarily dissolved during the Cultural Revolution).

By the end of 2009, total ACFTU membership had reached 226 million, which included 80 million rural migrant workers. The ACFTU’s “strong ties to the Chinese Communist Party and the pursuit of its agenda is a key factor in explainning why the ACFTU has not and will not act in the interests of workers”. Indeed, “the ACFTU has been an organ of the CCP, China’s sole trade union organisation (it was temporarily dissolved during the Cultural Revolution).

The book also describes recent workers’ struggles, such as the Zhengzhou Paper Mill workers’ struggle in 2000, the Liaoyang metal workers dispute in 2000-02, the Daqing Oil workers’ struggle in 2002 and the Chongqing 3403 factory dispute in 2004.

In 2004, there were more than 30 strikes reported in the Pearl River Delta alone that involved more than one thousand workers. Around the same time, workers at the Lanzhou Steel Company also won their fight against privatisation.

**FORCE**

These struggles “show that SOE and collective enterprises are still the backbone of China’s working class.”

In May 2010, probably the most high profile strike in China’s recent history began when Honda workers in Guangdong took action, calling for higher wages and, perhaps more significantly, the reorganisation of their workplace trade union. This triggered a wave of strike action by workers in foreign-owned car plants that summer. More than 50% of those who took part in the 1989 democracy movement — in fact most of them probably do not know of the event at all because of censorship — and who are prepared to fight to improve conditions at their own workplace.

Workers at Foxconn (which makes iPhones) in China walk out

Another merit of the book is its outline of the growth and recomposition of the Chinese working class over the past quarter century.

Au Loong Yu points out that today, “the working class comprises more than two-fifths of the Chinese working population. Industrial workers account for one quarter of the world’s total. Service workers account for one fifth”. Under rapid industrialisation, wage-earning workers have risen quickly at the expense of farmers “to the extent that it will soon constitute half or even more than half of the population”. The working class is a growing class while the peasants are a declining class.

This growth masks incredible restructuring. Over the last two decades, the state sector has nearly halved its workforce, from 100 million to 61 million workers, meaning that “the majority of the present day working class is composed of rural migrant workers who have no collective memory as a class prior to coming to the cities”.

Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, a new working class composed of 250 million rural migrants was formed. While the number of SOE workers in China fell substantially, the overall body of wage labourers ballooned to nearly 400 million. China’s working class population “has never been this enormous. If this reversion to capitalism has anything positive about it, this is it”.

Au Loong Yu argues that the working class is increasingly the main class in democratic struggles in the future because it has a stake in winning democracy and the potential to win it. Either the working class “eventually achieves democracy by taking the lead in the struggles, or it will continue to suffer in a barbaric capitalism indefinitely”.

The book has a good summary of the last 25 years of worker struggles in China. It contains a lengthy discussion of the working class involvement in the mobilisations of 1989, which ended with the Tiananmen Square massacre. The account of the Beijing Autonomous Workers’ Federation is based heavily on the Hong Kong Trade Union Education Centre book, A Moment of Truth: Workers’ Participation in China’s 1989 Democracy Movement and the Emergence of Independent Unions (1990). It explains how workers’ demands and independent forms of organisation grew during this opening triggered by students, only to be smashed by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

A chapter by Bai Ruixue quotes official figures that between 1993 and 2003, the number of “collective incidents” grew from around 10,000 to 60,000, with the number of participants involved growing from 730,000 to over 3 million. In 2009, when the Public Security Ministry stopped publishing figures, the number of collective incidents had grown to 87,000. With the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008, the number of labour disputes has grown even further as factories closed and large numbers of workers were laid off.

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By the end of 2009, total ACFTU membership had reached 226 million, which included 80 million rural migrant workers. The ACFTU’s “strong ties to the Chinese Communist Party and the pursuit of its agenda is a key factor in explainning why the ACFTU has not and will not act in the interests of workers”. Indeed, “the ACFTU has been an organ of the Communist Party ever since its establishment”. Under Chinese employment law, workers have no freedom of association and cannot simply join a trade union of their choice. To be a legally recognised union, all trade unions must be affiliated to the ACFTU, all independent trade unions and other such organisations by workers is prohibited.

The book navigates the debate about international union relations with the ACFTU. The ITUC has an approach of “engaging in critical dialogue” with the ACFTU, with some unions developing links, while others have virtually “no contacts”.

In some recent struggles, workers have used local elements of the ACFTU or works council (staff and Workers’ Representative Councils) to advance their initial organisation. Au Loong Yu is critical of Han Dongfang and the China Labour Bulletin, who he says now call for the “depoliticisation” of the labour movement (and for work within the ACFTU), instead of their previous position of fighting for an independent trade union movement. This is an important strategic and tactical debate.

Continued on page 10
It is very unfortunate that this book is marred throughout by a gap in the larger error that undermines the efforts to get to grips with current realities.

The mistake concerns the nature of the 1949 revolution, which brought Mao Zedong and the CCP to power, and the nature of the society they created.

The authors suggest that China had some sort of socialist revolution in 1949 and that China was some sort of post-capitalist workers’ state from 1949 throughout the Maoist period until the 1990s.

The so-called Fourth International, reconstituted after World War Two on the basis of very different politics from the time of Trotsky, initially defined the Mao’s regime as a “workers’ and peasants’ government”, before deciding in 1951 that it was a “deformed proletarian dictatorship” or “deformed workers’ state”. This is the depiction by Pierre Rosset in The Chinese Revolution: Part II: The Maoist Project Tested in the Struggle for Power (1987).

It can be clear from this book that key contributors retain this assessment. Rosset’s chapter attempts to iron out the contradictions, but his weasel words are unconvincing. Rosset refers to the idea of a socialist revolution in China in 1949 as “iconoclastic”, claiming that it confirms Trotsky’s theory of analysis of combined and uneven development, and the theory of permanent revolution. In the absence of working class agency, the events of 1949 do not amount to so much. Sadly his much-needed attempt to correct his 1987 oversimplification that China “lived through socialist revolution” and that the bureaucracy “originates from a workers’ and farmers’ revolution”.

Rosset asks: which party conquered power in 1949? However his answer is miserably evasive. He states: “No abstract definition can replace a concrete and dynamic historical analysis. Let’s just say that in 1949, the CCP was at the same time a party, and a government, a political and social agency. From its inception, the CCP enjoyed the support of the Chinese people; it had widespread support in the countryside, where the revolution had begun.”

Timely, “the failure of the Great Leap Forward should not be seen as a failure of Mao’s conception of the “protracted people’s war”. Apparatchik leadership have contributed a great deal to the development of Chinese Marxism-Leninism”. But an alternative explanation is available. The 1949 revolution was not a socialist revolution and the working class has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy was created workers’ state. This is the depiction by Pierre Rosset in The Chinese Revolution: Part II: The Maoist Project Tested in the Struggle for Power (1987).

The bureaucracy acted and functioned as a ruling class from the start, savagely exploiting workers and peasants — plus labour, sometimes in semi-slave labour camps, barracks-like state factories and forced-march communes.

The authors fall back on the argument that Trotsky predicted that the Stalinist bureaucracy (in the USSR) would either have to restore capitalism or be swept away by workers’ revolution. But Trotsky expected the USSR, which he defined as a degenerated workers’ state (because it had at least had a workers’ revolution in 1917), to collapse during the Second World War. However later in his life he realised that the Stalinist USSR had spread its relations of production through Red Army bayonets into Eastern Poland. However historically the crucial point is that the Stalinist USSR has never ruled China. The Stalinist-Stalinism bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China. The Maoist-Stalinist bureaucracy has never ruled China.
Where next for the universities dispute?

By a college lecturer

After three one-day strikes and three two-hour strikes by UCU members — the universities’ pay dispute looks no closer to resolution. The employers are refusing to talk, and say they regard the 2013/14 round as settled with the imposition of a 1% rise. The UCU leadership has not delivered the escalation strategy proposed back in September — which would have seen a marking boycott begin in time to hit first semester exams in a significant proportion of institutions.

Instead there have been two-hour strikes which, although not badly supported, have not caused the disruption necessary to move the employers.

The UCU’s Higher Education Committee is due to meet on 14 February to discuss the next steps, and many branches have submitted calls for quick escalation.

However, there are no easy answers about exactly what that should mean. The delay in moving to a marking boycott means we’ve missed the chance to hit January exams, and realistically that tactic will now have to wait until the summer exam season.

In the meantime the difficulty will be maintaining mobilisation of members until after Easter. Joint action with the NUT, which has called a one-day strike for 26 March, is an obvious option. Rolling strikes, hitting different departments in sequence, may also prove more fruitful than repeated one-day action.

There is also a question over the operation of the marking boycott tactic. It looks increasingly likely that — unlike in 2006 — some employers will immediately move to withhold full pay on the basis that refusing to mark is partial performance. Work needs to begin now to convince members of the need to have that fight. It’s also important to start thinking now how union members not directly involved in marking could be mobilised if the dispute moves in that direction.

For some branches, a strong mobilisation over the strike to date will have strengthened their hand in local negotiations. There will be opportunities to build on that — alongside students — to fight for demands like the Living Wage, which is a serious problem, and the use of zero-hours contracts, and against the increasing commercialisation of universities more generally.

Students should talk to their local trade union reps about how best to support this campaigning — and what they can do to build solidarity with the ongoing action.

Protests around extravagant pay hikes for top managers, organising initiatives for casualised workers, and debates around the future of the universities are all good options.

Ineos sacks union convener

By Dale Street

Unite convener Mark Lydon was sacked by Ineos (Grangemouth) last week.

His dismissal follows the resignation three months ago of another Unite convener, Stevie Deans, after a witch-hunt based on collusion between Ineos, the media, the pretext for the witch-hunt being his failure to stop Unite from holding to talk, and say they regard the 35% pay rise offered by management, a deal which is tied in with a number of attacks on workers’ terms and conditions, including the abolition of a class-contact maximum.

Lecturers fear that with these protections removed, they could face a major increase in their workload with little to show for it.

The strikers have received support from the students’ union and other workers at the college.

Ambulance bosses back down

Yorkshire Ambulance Service has backed down on plans to withdraw payments for late meal breaks, as a result of threatened industrial action from Unison and two days of action from the minority union, Unite.

The final rejection vote from Unison members on the changes was 80% despite a branch committee recommendation. There are still important issues remaining, not least a small group of members facing a 25% pay cut through a rota change, but the strongest message to go out at this stage is that even in these hard times members working together at workplace level can achieve victories.

Members meetings of Unison and Unite this week will plan what next.

Aramark caters struggle for 3 Cosmos

By Ira Berkovic

The 3 Cosmos Campaign at the University of London has turned its attention to the catering provider Aramark, another outsourced company providing services.

Though the University claims to be a Living Wage employer, the campaign has produced evidence that some Aramark workers are being paid below the London Living Wage rate of £8.80 per hour. An Aramark worker’s payslip posted on Facebook shows that some employees are earning just over £8.

Aramark employees have not benefited from the changes introduced to the Ballfour Beatty and Cofely GDF-Suez contracts after the two-day strike by Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB) members last November.

Aramark still receive only the statutory minimum levels of sick pay and holiday pay.

An officer of the University of London IWGB branch told Solidarity that the union has received an influx of members from Aramark in the last week, complaining of bullying and harassment from managers. One worker told him that she was dissatisfied with the local Unison branch, which as far as she was concerned “works for Aramark.”

This is the same Unison branch whose CoRly representative recently took two workers to a disciplinary hearing in her capacity as their manager. Unison members, who are overwhelmingly in support of the 3 Cosmos Campaign, should demand that the national union investigates its Senate House branch and the regional officers responsible for overseeing it.

Aramark caterers struggle against double-cross

Teachers at the Stern Academy, a “free school” in Islington, suspended three days’ strike on 11-13 February after bosses agreed to talk about union recognition.

Management at the school have been trying to force teachers onto “zero-hours” contracts, with legal consequences threatened for those who don’t comply.

Management have also refused to recognise the NUT as the union representing the teachers.

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Free school strikes against double-cross

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New law whips up anti-migrant racism

The government has already given itself the right to strip dual citizens of British citizenship. All of this is designed to create a hostile environment for migrants into the UK. Like all border controls, the new and intricate system of checks and restrictions sends out the message that all migrants are “suspect” and must be vouched for, or vouch for themselves by having plenty of cash, before gaining acceptance.

The bill chimes with the worst rhetoric coming from the far-right, legitimised by “mainstream” politicians. Just last week, UKIP MEP and party executive member Gerard Batten stood by the “charter of Muslim Understanding” he commissioned in 2006, which asked Muslims to renounce passages in the Koran.

Meanwhile, the Observer that LGBT asylum seekers have been subject to inappropriate and degrading “interrogations” about details of their sexual preferences. Immigration barrister Colin Yeo told the paper that: “The underlying problem is that officials believe everyone is a liar. It leads to a fundamental lack of respect for the people they are dealing with.”

The government has also accepted an amendment which will allow the state to strip naturalised citizens of the their citizenship if they are suspected of terrorism. Note, “suspected” not “proved to be”. However in other countries (e.g. Canada) this measure is being applied to other crimes.

The Tory’s nasty new Immigration Bill is expected to pass into law this spring. The Coalition has said that it wishes to reduce yearly net migration to the “tens of thousands”. And Home Secretary Theresa May admits that the Immigration Bill is about “making it harder for people who are here illegally to stay here”.

The new law will turn landlords and GPs into border guards.

Landlords will be required to check the immigration status of potential tenants or face a £3,000 fine. Many landlords will simply refuse to rent to anyone who looks or sounds “foreign”. Similar checks apply to opening bank accounts and issuing driving licenses. The Tories also intend to restrict migrants’ access to the NHS. GP practices will refuse to rent to anyone who looks or sounds “foreign”.

The bill is “offensive and wrong”, says Immigration barrister Colin Yeo. It’s nothing short of inhuman. It introduces new considerations for when a court or tribunal is asked to decide if a decision, such as deporta- tion, breaches a person’s “right to respect for private and family life” under Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

The bill violates the “charter of Muslim Understanding” it claims to defend.

Deportees’ private lives and relationships formed while their immigration status was “precarious” or unlawful should, it is advised, carry “little weight.”

This is the case with all border controls, which empower capitalist states to choose those workers which serve the needs of capital while forcibly and violently removing those who do not.

Socialists must demand the opening of borders and uphold the freedoms of those wishing to make a new life for themselves in another country, for whatever reason.

The labour movement needs to organise all workers, regardless of immigration status, and open its doors to migrants.

By Michéal Ennis

Sochi games: gay rights protesters arrested

On Friday 7 February, the Russian authorities arrested at least 61 people in the run-up to the Winter Olympics opening ceremony in Sochi.

The arrests of gay protesters in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. Protesters arrested.

The arrests spanned from the Caucasus to the capital St Petersburg. The government is seemingly tolerating no dissent, even far away from the location of the games in the

In the capital, four activists were arrested for unfurling a banner near the State Hermitage Museum which read: “Discrimination is incompatible with the Olympic Movement. Principle 6, Olympic Charter.” These included Anastasia Smirnova, who recently met with the president of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, on the issue of Russia’s restrictions on gay rights.

In a pathetic and supine public statement, the IOC’s head of media relations Emmanuelle Moreau told the Internet aggregate site Buzzfeed that: “We understand that the protesters were quickly released. As in many countries in the world, in Russia, you need permission before staging a protest. We understand this was the reason they were temporarily detained.”