EDUCATION: FOR LIFE, NOT PROFIT! See page 5
A “trade-union party”?  

By Martin Thomas

The Annual General Meeting on 29 General Meet- ing on 29 March for the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy will discuss the idea of proposing to the unions that they set up their own semi- party, tied to Labour by an agreement but able to campaign autonomously.

A motion from Jon Lansman calls for “explorative discussions... to seek to establish (after the general election)... a ‘trade union party’, along the lines of the Co-op Party - that is to say a political party to further the political interests of the trade unions by seeking an agreement with the Labour Party (rather than by opposing it or replacing it)...”

It also suggests that CLPD “campaign for the rights of all affiliated supporters to have full rights of participation in OMOV ballots for the selection of parliamentary candidates... consider whether to promote the right of members of unions which are currently not affiliated to the party, but which have political funds, to become affiliated supporters...”

Talking to Solidarity, Jon Lansman stressed the need to advocate a positive initiative by the trade unions in response to the Collins changes in the Labour Party, which threaten, over time, to stifle the trade-union voice within Labour. Repetitive defensive measures and damage-limitation ploys cannot be enough.

If the trade unions decide to mobilise politically, we should examine why not propose that they take the channels already provided by the Labour Party (the union vote at Labour conference, the right of union branches to send voting delegations to local Labour Parties) rather than setting up a new structure which would then lobby and pressure the Labour Party? The Co-op Party, replied Jon Lansman, is at present discredited among trade unionists. A structure which belongs and is congenial to the trade unions might attract many who are unwilling, as of now, to take up the uphill fight against careerists and entrenched interests in the Labour Party. The new initiative, he said, would have to be done collectively by the unions, or at least by a number of unions. That is preferable to each union having its own political strategy and its own, often ineffectual, effort to mobilise members politically.

The new initiative would not become a revolutionary party. It would reflect and channel the trade-union policies on issues such as employment rights, union rights, the living wage, and so on.

Now is an odd time to cite the Co-op Party as a model, after the scandals and crises at the Co-op Oper- ative Bank. But it is a loose analogy rather than a model.

The Co-op Party was set up in 1917, in the political tumult around the end of World War One. Until 1927 there were Co-op MPs, who took the Labour whip in Parliament. In 1927 the Co-op Party had a deal whereby the Co-op Party is a “sister party” of Labour, sponsoring some “Labour and Co-op” candidates (32 MPs at the last count), has individual-membership local organisations, and has its own party conference.

Currently it has about 9,000 members. People can and do join the Co-op Party without joining Labour, but the 1927 deal says that they must not also be members of parties standing candidates against Labour. In practice, Co-op organisation has sometimes functioned as caucuses for political factions intervening in Labour, including sometimes the Communist Party.

A “trade-union party” would have to be set up differently from the Co-op Party, with some structural role for trade-union organis- ations. But, says Jon Lansman, that can be sorted out if unions are keen on the basic idea.

Could this “trade-union party” end up helping Labour right-wing quagmires to quash the union voice in the Labour Party itself, by allowing them to tell trade unionists that they have their voice through the “trade-union party” and do not need extra? Jon Lansman thinks not: the “trade-union party” would not have votes within the Labour Party, but could act as a force to uphold and en- liven the votes the unions do have.

If the idea gains support at the CLPD AGM, then further discussion will be needed throughout the Labour movement.

G4S killers to stand trial

By Tom Harris

Three G4S security guards are to be charged with the manslaughter of Jimmy Mubenga, an asylum seeker who was killed during attempts to deport him from the UK.

Mubenga died in 2010 on a plane at Heathrow Airport. As the plane awaited take-off, Mubenga was physically restrained by the guards. He died of coronary-respiratory failure.

Mubenga had lived in Britain for 16 years. He had fled here from Angola, where, as a student movement leader, he fell foul of the governing regime.

In 2012, the Crown Prosecution Service decided against bringing charges against either the security company G4S, or against the three guards. However, they have now decided to prosecute the guards based on the unlawful killing verdict of a coroner’s inquest.

The coroner’s report was highly critical of the practices and culture of the G4S guards working in deportation. It described a “pervasive” atmosphere of racism, “loutish” behaviour and peer pressure, as well as financial incentives for keeping detainees quiet.

The report said that these factors combine to create a culture in which the brutal treatment and abuse of those being deported could flourish.

The inquest also dis- covered that the three guards had “highly offen- sive” racist jokes on their phones at the time of their arrest.

1,600 post jobs to go

By Gerry Bates

Royal Mail has announced plans to cut 1,600 jobs.

The cuts, mainly of back-room and Head Office jobs, come in the wake of the privatisation of the service last year.

Unite and the CWU union, both of whom have many members working in the post, have said they are consid- ering balloting for strike action. A spokesman from Unite claimed the job cuts had been calculated to make the service more attractive to the market.

Almost four months ago, the CWU agreed a deal with management that would give Royal Mail workers a 9% pay increase and a range of guarantees against zero-hour contracts and compulsory job losses.

In return, the union agreed to measures which would curtail the potential for local strikes. Even if voluntary redundancywere forthcoming, the scale of the job cuts in this new announcement raises serious questions about whether Royal Mail bosses will honour the agreement.

Privatisation means running services for private profit, rather than for social need. Fighting against these cuts will take not just the threat of industrial action, but a willingness to carry it through.
Lithuania: anti-LGBT laws blocked

By Paul Penny

Amidst the admonitions and international condemnation following the recent introduction of draconian anti-gay laws in Nigeria and Uganda, news from Lithuania (13 March), where a bill proposing Russia-style “gay propaganda” laws was blocked by MPs, came as a relief to LGBT rights activists.

A majority of members of the Lithuanian Parliament voted to bring the proposal to a vote (39 in favour, 34 opposed, with 20 abstentions). However, the anti-gay legislation was defeated because of parliamentary rules that require a threshold of votes to be reached as well as a majority.

Petras Gražulis, the Lithuanian Christian Democrat MP who introduced the bill in an attempt to stop the 2014 Baltic Pride, accused conservative politicians who did not back the bill of “not only changing their political orientation, but their sexual orientation as well.”

The bill proposed to outlaw LGBT Pride in Lithuania; ban speaking in public about sexual orientation, but impose fines for any public display defying “traditional family values”.

Petras Gražulis is Lithuania’s leading anti-LGBT politician, and he continues to spearhead homophobia and anti-gay sentiment in Lithuania, regularly equating homosexuality to pedophilia and bestiality.

In May 2012, he gate-crashed a conference organised by social democratic MP Marija Aurinė Pavilionienė and the Lithuanian Gay League, held in the parliament building on the eve of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, and declared that all gay people should leave the country.

“How are homosexuals better than necrophiliacs or pedophiles?” he ranted. “I’m ashamed that the rotten West, coming from the European Union that is morally corrupted, propagates this to Lithuania and tells us how we should treat homosexuals. Gays should leave Lithuania, not dictate their terms to us.”

Lithuanian lawmakers will consider further anti-LGBT bills this spring. A second bill, also sponsored by Gražulis and other anti-gay politicians, aims to force the organisers of Baltic Pride to pay all expenses to protect the event from homophobic attack. A third bill calls for a ban on adoption by same-sex couples. A fourth bill aims to make it lawful and permissible to vitify LGBT people.

The Lithuanian Government has already said it will oppose the last bill.

Teenage Gezi victim dies

By Markist Tutum

15-year-old Berkin Elvan, who was hit by a police canister in the head during the Gezi protests in June 2013 and had been in coma since then, died on 11 March. He was hit in Istanbul’s Okmeydani neighbourhood when he went out to buy bread.

He became one of the symbols of the Gezi protests. News of his death has created a burst of anger leading to numerous protests across the country.

His funeral was a huge protest participated in by hundreds of thousands of people. They expressed their anger at the AKP government and its police force. But the police did not hesitate to attack the funeral as well. Many people were wounded and arrested.

Immediately after the news of Berkin’s death a two-day protest boycott was declared in many high schools and universities. KESK (Confederation of Public Employees’ Unions) and DISK (Confederation of Revolutionary Workers’ Unions) called for a work stoppage to be carried out on the day of the funeral.

The government kept referring to “social violence” as if it was not police terror that killed Berkin.

Berkin’s murderers are the police whom Erdogan called “heroes making history” and the government giving the order to attack the people. The police killed seven young people (Berkin is the eighth) and wounded thousands during the Gezi protests. Thousands of protestors are under threat of being sentenced to more than ten years in prison.

Meanwhile the police is heavily protected by the government, evidence is hidden from the courts, etc.

Berkin is not the only child of ours whose life was taken by this murderer state. Those Kurdish children killed with bombs dropped by warplanes in Rojava, those Ceylans, Ugurs, Mahsums and hundreds of others killed by bombs, bullets, mines, tanks of the army and police — they are all ours...

529 death sentences

By Phil Grimn

An Egyptian court has sentenced 529 supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood to death.

The judge in the central city of Minya took only two court sessions to issue the death sentences, and lawyers for the defence had no opportunity to argue their case.

In the summer of 2013, hundreds of thousands of Brotherhood supporters took the streets in protest at the army’s coup against the government of Mohamed Morsi.

The military brutally suppressed these demonstrations and declared the Islamists organisation illegal. In Cairo, over 900 protestors were killed as the state deployed a pro-Morsi dictatorship. It was during that confrontation that the 529 defendants were arrested.

Their death sentences are punishment for the alleged murder of a single police officer. A further 663 Brotherhood supporters will be brought before the court this week.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a reactionary, right-wing religious organisation which deserves the hostility and opposition of all socialists, working-class activists and democrats. But, this mass death sentence is barbarous repressive measure, the act of an undemocratic military government.

It is part of a general represssion against dissent and organised opposition in which human rights groups estimate 23,000 political activists have been arrested.

This repression will be used against democratic and labour movement activists too.

529 death sentences

Steve Brisco

Lesser evilism is no way to stop advance of the Front National

By Michael Johnson

The first round of the French municipal election has seen a strong showing for the far-right Front National, with turnout falling to an historic low of 38.72%.

The election is being seen as a blow to President François Hollande. His Socialist Party is set to receive 43% nationwide, against 48% for the centre-right UMP opposition.

Exit polls suggest that the FN has received 5.7%, an alarming level of support given that it was represented in fewer than 600 of the 36,000 municipalities in Play.

The fascists had their strongest showing in the socialist stronghold of Henin-Beaumont in northern France, where FN candidate Steve Briois unseated the left incumbent, winning in the first round with 50.26% of the vote.

The town’s constituency gained widespread attention in 2012, when Front de Gauche’s Jean-Luc Melénchon stood against FN leader Marine Le Pen, in what was seen as a battle over working-class voters in an area hard-hit by deindustrialisation and unemployment.

Briois is the FN’s first mayor in 17 years, and the party is also in contention for mayoral seats in four other towns, and boasts 472 councillors already.

In 15 cities, FN candidates head the list going into the second round on Sunday 30 March. The French Socialist Party’s President in the National Assembly, Claude Bartolone, is calling for tactical voting to keep out the FN.

Brice is no rule out the idea that Socialist candidates may withdraw in order to let the centre-right UMP win in areas where the latter is stronger, saying: "If this is the solution, it must be done."

This general approach was echoed by Communist Party’s President Jean-Philippe Chassagne who said: "For the second round, the priority is to bar the way to the rise of the far-right and the National Front."

The rise of the far-right is alarming but this sort of lesser-evilism is not the answer. It parallels the call from some sections of the left to back Jacques Chirac against Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of the 2002 presidential election.

We argued at the time that the central task of Marxists in the labour movement was to develop the political independence of the working-class from all factions of the capitalist class, and to encourage it to rely on its own strength and efforts. In doing this, as Trotsky put it: "All methods are good which raise the class-consciousness of the workers, their trust in their own forces, their readiness for self-sacrifice in the struggle."

The logic of tactical voting is to stand aside or endorse a vote for the right-wing bourgeois politicians of the UMP, who are partly responsible for the social conditions in which the far-right is thriving.

This serves to abrogate the left’s own politics and independence, and cuts against the tasks of breaking workers away from fascism.

This is a high price to pay for temporary electoral victories against the far-right, which do nothing to cut the roots of fascism and may have the effect of further boosting the UMP.
Left solidarity needs to venture offline

Letters

Bruce Robinson is right. My claim that networked communi-
cations foreclose political possibilities was too extreme. I revis-
ed it in the version of the essay that appeared in my book Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies.

I express the idea as the displacement of politics. (The terms “foreclosure” and “displacement” come from psychoanalytic theory. The implication of “foreclosure” is that only psychotic acts and violence is possible. The implication of “displacement” is that political action takes place not in the site of antagonism but elsewhere.)

Why exactly was my earlier claim too strong? Bruce says because it is too all-embracing and leads to contradictory con-
clusions. I think we can be more precise here.

My earlier claim of foreclosure was too broad because it did not highlight conservative, capitalist, and liberal (that is to say, bourgeois) politics as the kind of politics that flour-
ishes in online settings because of the basic features of net-
worked communication (features that make extreme views more likely to attract attention, that privilege short, punchy claims rather than thoughtful arguments, that increase the circulatory power of images and emotion etc. — for more de-
tails of this argument, see my book Blog Theory). So, my claim regarding foreclosure was not too extreme because it omitted left political possibilities but because the term foreclosure did not account for right ones.

Bruce wants us to think of the internet as it serves interna-
tional solidarity and serious political debate.

What is at stake in thinking of the internet as serving inter-
national solidarity and serious political debate? The claim has to involve more than something like “email lets us send an-
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Help us raise £12,000 by October

This week we have been preparing the initial publicity for our annual summer event, Ideas for Freedom (4-6 July). The theme this year is “Their Class War and Ours”. For six years the ruling class has the upper hand. At IFF you can count on some hard-thinking and open debate.

Challenges for the People’s Assembly

About 450-500 people attended the People’s Assembly delegate conference in London on 15 March. I found myself voting through numerous weakly written but well intended motions, for example an “immigrants are welcome here” motion, with no call to open the borders.

Every moving of a motion, supplement, or amendment attracted a large amount of applause, and by the end, this had become rather tedious. Especially as “in the interests of time” speeches were very limited and serious or pro-
tacted debate was very scarce with no taking motions in parts from the floor.

That said, there does seem an opportunity to make cal-
culated interventions over issues of democracy as well as to push for a retirement of the People’s Assembly pro-
grame to a sharper class-struggle agenda.

At the very least, that could orient the assembly to be-
come a more focused and disciplined environment that eschews the temptation for self congratulation through constant applause.

There is a contingent of organised far left groupings that could be aligned with, and a selection of newer activists who would gain valuable experience from the degree of involvement that an enhancement in democratic proceed-

ges would bring.

The first changes in structure we should call for are:

1) End clapping of every single motion, amendment and supplemen
t to save time
2) Use the extra time allow for amendments to be thor-
oughly debated, more speeches for and against, and take
tions in parts where there is no clear majority.

We also need to move towards a culture of critical de-
bate and calculated action if we are to use this chance to cultivate a force that can seriously challenge the neo-liberal consensus that is wrecking our future.

Andy Francis
Education: for life, not for profit!

The coalition government, building on New Labour, is pushing to shape education more and more along capitalist market standards and criteria. They dare not making schooling just something bought and sold on the market. Even if they don’t care that barring children of worse-off parents from schooling would be unjust, they concede that it would produce an unqualified workforce and a brutalised society.

Insanely, though, they continue with the superstition that, short of that full-scale marketisation, the closer they can bring education to capitalist norms of competition and capitalist norms of management, the better.

Schooling is geared more and more to “marketable” scores and assessments. Students are pushed to get GCSE grades which will “buy” jobs, or “buy” a chance to do A-levels. They are pushed to get the A-level grades which “buy” a place at a rich university. At university they are pushed to get the degree result which “buys” a good job.

With that pseudo-market metric as basis, school is pushed into competition with school, teacher with teacher, student with student.

The new methods for that are the vast expansion of academies and free schools, and the comprehensive roll-out of performance-related pay for teachers.

57% of secondary schools in England are now academies (though, as yet, only 11% of primaries). There are now 125 state-funded “free schools” either open or planned. All these schools compete with each other to get students and sponsors. As they feed off each other, an army of lawyers, head-hunters, accountants, estate agents and management consultants feed off them, siphoning away a total of £77 million since May 2011.

Schools have to pay more top-heavy structures of management piled on them. A year ago, 700 head teachers in England were getting £100,000 a year, and 200 more than £110,000.

The boss of one chain of state-funded academy schools got almost £320,000 — plus pension contributions — in a 12-month period.

Many get bonuses. In a court case in October 2013, a retired head teacher was given a suspended sentence because he had paid himself, three staff members and two governors a total of £2.7 million over some years through bonuses and salaries.

Teachers’ pay now depends on “performance”, measured largely through their students’ “marketable” scores. Under that pressure, average work hours for teachers have increased by nine per week to 60 for primary teachers, by six per week to 56 for secondary, since 2010. 40% of new teachers drop out of the job within five years.

Universities now compete harshly for the “best” students — from 2013 they can enrol as many students with ABB or better A-level grades as they like — and the fees they bring. Getting the “best” students, and paying fancy salaries to prestigious professors, enables rich universities to stay rich, because their ex-students then get posh jobs and can be tapped for donations and bequests.

To run this sort of university, you need not someone who cares about ideas or education, but a crazed capitalist manager type with a brain stuffed full of stupid “managerial” buzzwords and a huge salary.

Russell Group (rich) university bosses are now on about £250,000 a year, and in 2012-13 they got an average pay rise of more than £22,000 (8%).

Street art

The student, education is increasingly presented as an “investment”. If you stay on at school, then go to university and pay fees, and if you jump through the right hoops to get “marketable” scores, you will get a “return on your investment” by higher pay. What you learn or don’t learn is by the way.

This capitalist-oriented education is not even utilitarian, though some socialists indict it as such. Much of the stuff crammed into current school syllabuses is about as utilitarian as an old-fashioned wing-tip collar.

It is narrow, stunted, and stunting. Even where it teaches good content, it adbles and taints it with the compulsion to compete.

Students, teachers, education workers, parents - unite and fight for education which enlarges life rather than stunting it!

Higher education tuition-fee system is failing

Despite the rise in tuition fees to £9,000-a-year for UK students and scrapping of most direct funding to universities, the new higher education funding framework is likely to cost the state more than the system it replaced.

An increasing number of graduates are failing to pay back their student loans. Repayments are linked to earnings. Graduates repay their loans when they earn over £21,000.

In 2010, the government estimated that 28% of loans would not be recovered. Persistently low wages for young adults and the stormy economic outlook have led the civil service to revise down its estimates of the proportion of loans that will be paid back. New official forecasts suggest write-offs at 45%.

This is approaching the level at which the government will not have saved any money from implemented the new system. Analysis from London Economics says that, “if the estimated... proportion of the fee and maintenance loans never recovered increases beyond 48.6 per cent, the economic cost of the 2012-13 higher education reforms will exceed the 2010-11 system that it replaced”.

There is also evidence that the new system, taken by itself, is already costing the government more, as the figures include the expense of writing off loans under both the old and new systems. According to the same analysts, the write-off costs for the new system may already have reached 50%.

These revised estimates are probably linked to the government’s decision to cut funding in other parts of the 2014-15 higher education budget.

The failure of the government to save any money from the new system should not be surprising. Although the need to bring down the deficit was used publicly to justify the rise in fees, transferring higher education funding on to the backs of individual students was always mainly about creating a controlled market in the sector. The new system has accelerated the restructuring of higher education around the principles of competition and profit, with institutions striving against each other to attract students.

The public failure of the new system creates a opportunity to re-open the debate on higher education funding. As Andrew McGettigan has said: “Any claim to savings from the new regime has disappeared and we now need an urgent inquiry into the whole scheme. Something is seriously awry and we need clarification on what this might mean for other aspects of the higher and further education budgets.”

The Tories could now look at cutting the threshold at which graduates start paying back their loans. They could also raise the rate of repayment, which was already hiked once 2010.

Though they opposed raising fees to £9,000, it was the Labour Party which introduced fees in the first place. Labour is committed to reducing the cap on fees to £6,000. And it is still committed to the principle that it is individual students who should bear the burden of paying for education (potentially through a graduate tax).

Left-wing student activists need to intervene in these debates arguing explicitly for free, publicly-funded education at all levels, and should aim to build lively activist groups on every campus to organise around these ideas.

The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) exists to give a national expression to local anti-cuts groups and develop ideas for the student movement as a whole.

• anticuts.com
US unions since 1988

By Erik Forman

Activists of my generation are too young to remember, but in the first half of the 1980s, the US labour movement lost a fifth of its membership to union-busting, plant closings, outsourcing, deregulation, automation, two recessions, and the growth of the non-union service sector. Union leaders began looking for ways to stop the bleeding.

The AFL-CIO unveiled its answer in 1988: “internal organising.” The goal was to revive a social movement feeling in unions by bringing the mobilising techniques used in external organising drives into existing bargaining units. Activists, who had seen US unions ossify into bureaucratic dinosaurs, welcomed the focus on rank-and-file participation. The manual, “Numbers that Count,” rapidly became one of the AFL-CIO’s most-requested publications.

At the same time, AFL-CIO leaders began to push for affiliated unions to organise the unorganised. In 1989 they established an Organising Institute to train members and staffs in the model.

However, the connection between these two forms of “organising” — building more participatory locals and recruiting new members — remained murky.

Union density hit a new low of 14.9% in 1995, convincing many that these steps were not enough. The New Voice slate led by the Service Employees’ (SEIU) John Sweeney ran on an “organising” platform and won leadership of the AFL-CIO.

The new officers increased the Institute’s budget and released a blueprint titled “Organising for Change, Changing to Organise.” They called on affiliates to throw more staff, money (30% of their budgets), planning, and member activity into organising new shops.

If the US labour movement briefly seemed united behind “organising,” it didn’t last long. Many officers thought 30% was too much money. Some saw the new agenda as the AFL-CIO meddling in their internal politics. The shift of resources away from “servicing” members created tensions among officers, staffs, and members — between those energized by the prospect of expanding labour’s ranks and those who wanted to focus on enforcing contracts in existing locals.

Despite these contradictions, most unions got on board with the new agenda, at least on paper, but another split began to emerge over how to do external organising. “Movement builders” favoured a grassroots approach to building worker self-organisation, but “capacity builders,” on the other hand, placed campaigns in the hands of professional organisers, who would fly in for house-visit “blitzes.” This debate continues today.

Even as the organising model was beginning to disintegrate, Sweeney announced in 2000 that AFL-CIO affiliates would organise a million new members per year. Few unions hit the numbers they committed to, but the continued pressures of declining membership had thoroughly cracked the previous consensus around organising. Unions whose leaders still wanted to reallocate greater resources to organising formed a coalition of the willing called “Change to Win” — including SEIU, UNITE HERE, Carpenters, Teamsters, Food and Commercial Workers, and the Labourers — and left the AFL-CIO, touching off a new spate of rivalries.

But membership kept dropping. Today, aside from a few bright spots, the US labour movement is shrinking and largely ineffective at winning gains from employers. Why did unions in other countries want to emulate it?
"The organising model" went global
to focus on external organising. One organiser said, “We say [to members], ‘So we’re giving you all this work to do,’ and it really rings hollow unless they have more power to make decisions.”

There were many approaches to keeping down “overhead” costs for servicing. One national union opted not to encourage workers to organise themselves through a steward system, but instead opened a call centre to process grievances remotely.

The drive to revive labour as a social movement had rapidly descended into debates about how best to manage union staff in servicing and organising roles.

Despite the organising model’s flaws, its next stop was the UK. In the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher declared open season on labour. Bosses smashed the epic 1984-85 miners’ strike. Steel mills and factories shut down. Unions took cuts under the “New Realism.” Union membership declined from 55% in 1979 to less than 30% in 1998.

TUC officers tried a number of gimmicks. But glossy, corporate-style re-branding, union mergers, credit card schemes, and discounts on umbrellas (no joke) weren’t enough.

In 1998, the TUC established an Organising Academy, modelled on the Australian and US training centres. Its goal was to “rediscover the ‘social movement’ origins of labour, by redefining the union as a mobilising structure.” The OA also sought to diversify white and male-dominated staffs.

If numbers were all that counted, the OA would be a modest success story. In its first 10 years, it trained a relatively diverse group of 270 new professional organisers, who are credited with the recruitment of more than 50,000 new members.

Membership began to stabilise, hovering around 6 million for the past five years. But numbers aren’t all that count. Researchers Jane Holgate and Melanie Simms reflected in 2008 that reliance on professional organisers had left out rank-and-file activists, minimising the actual change in union culture.

In response to such criticism, the TUC opened an “Activist Academy” in 2009 for “lay activists” (rank-and-file and shop stewards). Will this be enough to put the movement back in the UK’s very top-down labour movement?

The organising model as practiced by the TUC, according to Holgate and Simms, has been hollowed out, stripped of its political content, and marketed as a value-neutral set of tools for signing up more members, with little to say about how the unions they join are run.

The turn toward organising has increased the level of labour activity in the UK, but few would say it has reinvigorated labour as a social movement. The heavy reliance on professional staff and lack of an overall strategy for shifting the balance of forces limit the impact of these campaigns.

Germany’s massive industrial unions have excited the jealousy of trade unionists elsewhere since the days of Walter Reuther — and, until recently, Germany was spared the worst of the neoliberal tide.

The reigning ideology of West German labour relations was “social partnership.” All employees of a large firm could elect a “works council” that would receive company funding, an office, and the right to be consulted over any major changes to production. Unions were an accepted part of the system: the massive DGB (Germany’s primary labour federation) signed sector-wide agreements with employer associations in each industry.

How much do recent movements like the US fast food workers’ strikes owe to “the organising model”?

Almost all UK unions now say they are “organising unions”, with large “departments” of paid organisers. Results in practice are variable.

But by the early 2000s, strange new words began to appear in the German lexicon: “outsourcing,” “the Management,” and “Teamsitzung” (“team meeting”).

A familiar pattern followed: subcontracting, increased temporary and part-time work, privatization of state services, and the rise of a low-wage service sector.

Since 1990, the DGB has lost half its members and union density has declined from 40 to 19%.

DGB leaders, like their overseas counterparts, looked for a survival strategy. A delegation of officers from ver.di (a service workers union like our Service Employees) traveled to the US in 2004 and returned home dedicated to the organising model. In one of the first campaigns to apply the model, ver.di and SEIU took on a joint project to organise security guards in Hamburg in 2007, resulting in a collective agreement with pay increases, and the establishment of works councils in several firms.

As “Das Organising Model” has spread, some of the same criticisms have surfaced in Germany as elsewhere. Many activists point out that the model is controlled from above. Others say the organising model is depoliticized and avoids deep questions about what kind of economy we want.

One activist found that an official union translation of Saul Alinsky’s classic organising manual, Rules for Radicals, had mysteriously left out a section on “democratizing the labour movement,” reinforcing the perception that officials are interested in turning unions into a “social movement” only when it means more members and dues, not when it means flattening out the hierarchies of the unions themselves.

More than 20 years after the AFL-CIO coined the term “organising model,” it is safe to say the model has produced only limited success. While the shift is certainly necessary, it has not been sufficient to revive labour as a social movement.

Everywhere the organising model has taken root, it has met these pointed critiques. First, the reliance on professional staff often reproduces the problems of the service model, as rank-and-file remain consumers of unions, rather than producers.

Second, the single-minded focus on signing up new members has too often led to partnership agreements with employers who permit unions to organise in exchange for weak contracts.

Third, the model has obscured deeper questions about labour’s vision and strategy. Even as capitalism destroys the planet and throws more people into misery, unions are looking backward to the structures of the New Deal rather than forward to a new world.

In recent months, we’ve seen the pressures of survival forcing unions to adopt organising methods derived from the grassroots tradition in the labour movement—such as striking for demands before a union is even recognised. The prospect of a new militancy emerging with backing from institutional players is exciting. But history has also shown that unless workers are not only empowered on the job but also fully in control of their unions, the rebirth of labour as a social movement will remain elusive.

Those of us who want to transform the workers’ movement and society have to elaborate our own model for labour renewal, from the bottom up.

Erik Forman has been active in the Industrial Workers of the World since 2005, working and organising at Starbucks and Jimmy John’s. He is currently compiling a report on union strategies for organising the food service and retail sectors as a Practitioner Fellow at the Kalmannovitz Initiative for Labour and the Working Poor at Georgetown University. Follow him at @_erikforman on Twitter.

For an unedited version of this article, see bit.ly/ef-om
The left in the miners’ strike

This year is the thirtieth anniversary of the great miners’ strike. A new book by Workers’ Liberty, out this week, tells the story of how working-class communities fought a Tory ruling-class government. But how did the left conduct itself?

By Gerry Bates

The Labour Party led then by the former “soft left” Neil Kinnock, refused to indict the government and brand its activities for the vicious class war they were.

Many thousands of rank and file Labour Party activists were, however, active organisers of the miners’ support groups. If the organised revolutionary socialist left had worked together seriously — for example in the Mineworkers’ Defence Committee — even our small forces could, perhaps, have tipped the balance.

Socialist Organiser (forerunner of Solidarity and Workers’ Liberty) threw everything it had into backing the miners.

We helped the rank and file strike committee in Nottinghamshire, the area where the strike faced most difficulties. We worked in the miners’ support groups and helped launch the national Mineworkers’ Defence Committee. We helped organise rank and file solidarity action among rail workers in the central Notts and South Yorkshire area.

From the beginning we supported and publicised the importance of the militant self-organisation and action by women in the pit communities (Women Against Pit Closures). Our supporters moved the main resolution supporting the miners at the 1984 Labour Party Conference (a resolution which was ignored by the Labour leaders). We argued in the labour movement for solidarity and a general strike, and for socialist politics.

The bigger battalions of the revolutionary left were disoriented, too self-absorbed and self-obsessed, organisationally and politically, to be other than a negative factor. The SWP had spent the previous five years preaching woe and defeat, and politically, to be other than a negative factor. The SWP seemed to have difficulty simply taking in the fact that the miners’ strike had broken out.

Tony Cliff, wrote that “the miners’ strike is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers Party have called the “downturn” in the movement” (Socialist Worker, 14 April 1984). They stuck to that view throughout the strike, even after they, very late, in October 1984, joined the miners’ support groups.

Week after week, SW told readers how much it regretted the lack of militancy in the miners’ strike and the probability of its defeat. Naturally the SWP deplored calls for a general strike — that is, it deplored educational work in the labour movement for effective action to stop the Tory offensive against the working class, of which the miners’ strike was the front line.

Only three or so years after the miners had been defeated did the SWP begin to revise the downturn theory and talk vaguely about new “volatility”. By 1992, after seven years of further grinding defeats, it was putting up posters with demands that the TUC call a general strike “now” — not to assist a serious battle in the labour movement to get a general strike, but to advertise the SWP as “militant”. It has remained in that mode, with many detailed variations, ever since.

Militant (forerunner of the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal) then had the leadership of the labour movement in Liverpool and of Liverpool’s Labour Council. They conducted the council’s conflict with the government over cuts as if they lived in a parallel universe to the world of industrial conflict in which the miners lives and fought.

When, in July 1984, the Tories offered Liverpool council a deal to postpone the budget issues, they accepted and demobilised the labour movement in Merseyside, which did want to fight, and which they could and should have led into a common fight with the miners.

That didn’t even save Militant’s own position. The deal with the Tories last a year and then, with the miners defeated, the Tories came after them. The Labour Party leaders came in that mode, with many detailed variations, ever since.

Next week, Solidarity will carry a report by Bob Myers of a visit to Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The country has been rocked by a wave of strikes and protests demanding jobs, better wages and economic equality. The movement has been characterised by a hostility to nationalism and government corruption. Tuzla was an industrial centre of the old Yugoslavia, and continues to be an industrial centre in Bosnia. The recent revolt began there.

Bosnia: generations unite against rip-offs

Many of the trade unionists are older people, predominately men. A new generation is now entering the scene, with women as prominent as men. They were children during the war, and many of them who spoke English got jobs with the post war circus of NATO, UN, NGOs etc and learnt at first hand the real agenda of the “international community” which was not to help Bosnians determine their own future but to impose a pre-decided policy on them.

Some of these people have studied abroad and have been active in student protests elsewhere, for example in the student fees protests in the UK. They use Facebook and the internet to communicate with each other, with the Bosnian diaspora, and with radical thinkers around the world.

They are also part of that movement which has developed all over the world over the last twenty years, often independent of the unions, and healthy suspicious of hierarchal structures and “leaderships”. Some could clearly leave and get very well paid academic positions abroad. The fact that they don’t, and that they are putting in huge hours to sustain the Plenums, shows how different they are from the nepotists and backstabbers of the political parties. All this gives them a great advantage.

It seems that some of them are inclined to see things in terms of right ideas against bad ones, clear politicians against corrupt ones. But right ideas will not abolish the coalition of robbers, both national and international, politicians, national and international, all of them acting on behalf of capital.

Indeed after a moment’s retreat in the face of the demonstrations, the ruling elite have regained their nerve and are preparing to clamp down on further protest and resist making any significant concessions.
Crimean Tatars: the nation Stalin deported

By Dale Street

The Crimean Tatars were annexed into the Russian Empire of Catherine II in 1783. Before then they had had an ambiguous relationship, half-vassal, half-independent, with the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Then numbering some 500,000, they were subjected to particularly brutal policies of Russification in the nineteenth century.

During the Crimean war, Tatars living on the coast were removed and “resettled” inland. After the war, Tsar Alexander II declared, “It is not appropriate to oppose the overt or covert immigration of the Tatars to voluntary emigration should be considered as a beneficial action calculated to free the territory from this unwanted population”. By the end of the century the Crimean Tatar population had fallen below 300,000.

Repression helped stimulate the Crimean Tatar national identity. Fearful of an alliance between the aroused Tatars and the Pan-Turkic movement, the Tsarist regime responded by further repression in the opening years of the 20th century. The Tatar organisation Vatan was declared illegal, Tsarist police agents spied on Tatar religious and educational activities and Tatar newspapers were heavily censored or closed down.

Following the 1917 October Revolution, the Crimea was occupied by counter-revolutionary armies. Tatar newspapers were banned, printing presses seized, and Tatar schools closed.

The defeat of the counter-revolutionary armies by the Red Army paved the way for the declaration of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in October 1921. Lenin had expressed his hopes for it two years earlier: “May the tiny Crimean Republic become one of the torches which cast the light of proletarian revolution onto the East”.

In the early months of the Crimean ASSR, there were terrible food shortages, but conditions improved. Output increased. The autonomy granted by the decree of 1921 was put into practice by the Crimean Bolshevik administration, which declared the Crimea and declared the Crimean Tatars too few in number to have any right to autonomy. The Tatar Latin alphabet (itself introduced only in 1928) was replaced by the Russian Cyrillic alphabet in 1938, in the full knowledge that this could not express all the sounds of the Crimean Tatars’ language. Crimean Tatar books were withdrawn from circulation. By 1938 the number of surviving Tatar-language newspapers had fallen to nine, from 23 just three years earlier.

The impact of such policies on the size of the Crimean Tatar population is difficult to estimate. In 1917, after growth in the opening decades of the century, the Crimean Tatars numbered 320,000. The population further increased in the 1920s, partly through indigenous growth, partly through immigration. By 1941, however, the Crimean Tatar population had fallen to about 250,000, which would suggest that Stalin’s policies had already claimed some 100,000 victims by 1941.

In December 1941 the Nazis invaded the Crimea. By late 1942 they had occupied the entire peninsula, Hitler advocated deportation of the entire population — Russians and Ukrainians as well as Tatars — and the repopulation of the Crimea by Germans from south Tirol. This would “solve” the problem of the South Tirol — an object of dispute with Italy — and create a “fortress state” populated by reliable Germans in a strategically important area.

It was done — partly because it would have disrupted Crimean industry and agriculture, which were being plunged for the German war effort, and partly because it would have alienated the Turkish government and pan-Turkish sentiment at a time when the Nazis were attempting to secure Turkish backing.

The Nazis even made some limited concessions to the Crimean Tatars. They were allowed a certain religious freedom, and Crimean Tatar schools and theatres were allowed to reopen. “Socialist Communities” were also created, and efforts were made to recruit Crimean Tatars into military units. This policy was very limited, and had small success in winning Crimean Tatar support for the Nazis. As the Nazis gave up hope of backing from Turkey, they stepped up repression in the Crimea. Crimean Tatars were shipped off to Germany to work in war industries, censorship of Crimean Tatar publications was increased, and Crimean Tatar villages were destroyed in order to deny Soviet partisans access to them.

The Crimean Tatars fought back. According to a 1973 issue of the samizdat journal “Chronicle of Current Affairs”, 35,000 Crimean Tatars fought in the first year of “resettlement” and a further 12,000 in the Soviet partisans. 30,000 Crimean Tatars died fighting the Nazis.

By the spring of 1944 the Crimean peninsula had been reconquered by the Russian Army. Then, beginning on the night of 17-18 May, the entire Crimean Tatar population was deported and scattered across Soviet Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and the Urals. What had been planned first by the Tatars and then by Hitler but never carried out, was now achieved by Stalin — a Crimean defeat of the Crimean Tatars.

Some 100,000 Crimean Tatars, 40% of the population, died in the first year of “resettlement” and a further 12,000 in the Soviet partisans. Tatars still serving in the Russian Army were deported on demobilisation.

An “Open Letter in Defence of the Crimean Tatars”, circulating in Moscow in 1969, describes the journey into “resettlement”.

“This was the journey of slow death in railway carriages for cattle, stuffed full of people like sponges. The journey lasted three or four weeks and passed through the burning summer steppes of Kazakhstan. They transported the red partisans of the Crimea, the fighters of the Bolshhevik underground, Soviet and party activists, but invalids and old men as well. The other men were fighting the fascists at the front, and exile awaited them at the end of the war…”

Nationalist leaders such as Dzhelimov faced repeated threats to demonstrate publicly in Red Square resulted in a meeting with the government in July 1967. In September 1967 a decree officially withdrew the Stalinist accusations that the Tatars had collaborated with the Nazis, but avoided any commitment to redress. The Crimean Tatars continued to campaign. In the months following the September 1967 decree, some 10,000 attempted to return to the Crimea. They were barred, expelled, or forced out by discrimination and repression.

Leaving Crimean Tatar communities, such as Reshat Dzhelmilov, one of the leaders of the most recent demonstrations in Moscow, linked up with the broader Soviet dissident movement and won support from such people as Sakharov and Grigorenko. Lobbying of government ministers continued in Moscow, and demonstrations were organised in the Tatars’ places of exile.

The Crimean Tatars also began to regain their national culture. A book for the study of the Crimean Tatar language was produced, and several collections of Crimean Tatar literature published. A department for the publication of Crimean Tatar literature was set up in the Tashkent Gafur Galin Publishing House.

Crimean Tatar leaders such as Dzhelmilov faced repeated trials and prison sentences for “anti-Soviet activities”. Demonstrations were broken up, and mass arrests made. Furthermore in 1980s Crimean Tatars began to mobilise and demonstrate for their rights. Only under Gorbachev were they allowed to return to their homeland.
Turkey’s sub-imperialist choices

By Levent Toprak (Marksist Tutum)

Turkey’s recent political crisis started with the arrest of the sons of three cabinet ministers over claims of bribery and the rigging of state tenders. This quickly developed into a state-wide crisis.

The events appear to be a cut-throat power struggle between the government and Gülen movement, a transnational religious and social movement. But the matter cannot be reduced to that.

During the 12 years of AKP [Justice and Development Party] rule Turkish capitalism has grown fast; both natural resources and labour have been exploited and plundered immeasurably. During this period, besides ordinary bribery and corruption, we have also seen corruption encouraged by the amending of laws and regulations. Especially through amendments to laws governing bids for public contracts and regulations. Also the state audit court has been stopped from making substantial inspection and audits.

What has been leaked to the press since 12 December is just the tip of the iceberg of the corruption that the AKP is involved in; yet even this has shaken the political stage.

What we need to do is remember some basic facts. Bribery, corruption, and irregularities are natural phenomena under capitalism, decaying capitalism in particular. Although there might be certain differences of the sort and scope, this is true of even the most developed and “regular” capitalist countries.

Even in Germany, which seems to epitomise the rule of law, the president had to resign because of corruption just a year ago. We should also remember the Enron scandal in the USA under Bush. Exposure of such cases happens when they grow to such big dimensions they cannot be concealed or they pose a risk to the whole system and some politicians and parties have to be pushed out of the political scene.

Corruption always exists in capitalism and this surely serves as a means to advance capitalism in the context of working class struggles. However any condemnation of corruption not based on a revolutionary exposition of capitalism feeds illusions in the so-called virtues of a “decent” capitalism. The winning party will always be the capitalist order. Bad boys are condemned, scapegoated and, if possible, got ride of; the system is given a “cleaning.”

We must also never forget that corruption issues are used as a trap when there are struggles inside the ruling class.

SECTION

When one section of the rulers intends to push out or undermine another section, one of their most popular strategies is the disclosure of private lives and corruption issues.

The allegations are almost always true, but this is not the point. The masses are generally misled. The discredited order is cleaned and given a fresh start, and public support is gathered around those “bad” elements of the ruling order to get rid of them.

Beneath Turkey’s current corruption investigations lies a similar kind of political operation. On the one hand the masses are generally misled. Allegations of corruption are certainly true. But if we want to understand the essence of matters we have to go deeper. We have to ask why the coalition between AKP and the Gülen movement has ended. Why is the Gülen movement trying to put an end to Erdogan’s political career?

Gülenists have been following a long-term organising strategy of infiltrating into the state. They have an enormous following in the judiciary and police.

Lacking such numbers of cadres within the state apparatus, they have found support with Gülenist organisations, which are in a position to challenge pro-status quo Kemalist cadres who occupied critical positions in the state. When the Kemalist forces initiated efforts to get rid of the AKP, the AKP, in response, could fight back thanks to its alliance with Gülenists. This struggle essentially came to an end by the 2010 referendum liberalising the constitution. The elections that followed marked the beginning of a new period.

But after the victory against pro-status quo Kemalist forces there inevitably emerged conflicts between the winners over how to share the spoils. The influence of Gülenists within the state has not been welcomed by Erdogan. An organisation which is not under AKP’s control might well undermine it some day. Moreover this organisation was demanding a much greater say.

A more ambitious Erdogan, with a renewed sense of omnipotence and self-confidence, would not bear this situation forever. Moreover Erdogan had political hegemony which has been consolidated through various shifts within the state apparatus.

A settling of accounts with the Gülenists was inevitable. But the Gülenists had come up by a completely different route and stood on an independent ground. Far from bowing down to Erdogan, they apparently made high-handed demands. Apparently, the demands they made for more positions in the army and national intelligence service were not welcomed by Erdogan.

Up to a point these tensions were accommodated and brought to reconciliation. But the Rubicon was crossed and we are now on a new level with the investigations of corruption and the government attempt to abolish private teaching institutions which are the strongholds of the Gülenists educating their cadres. Yet these developments cannot be viewed as mere power struggle but fit into a bigger context.

ERDONAN’S AMBIITIONS

Capitalist development in Turkey has reached the level of a sub-imperialism. The question now is what kind of policies is this stage to be reflected in on an international level.

On the basis of Turkey’s rapid capitalist development Erdogan is increasingly following a more ambitious and risky path in foreign policy.

What would be the place of a sub-imperialist Turkey, with its 17th biggest economy in the world, membership of C20; its international investments? Would it be a sub-imperialist Turkey obediently following the US policies in the region and getting its modest share, or a relatively more independent sub-imperialist Turkey with much more greed? That was the choice in front of Turkey’s rulers.

Erdogan has chosen the latter, more risky option. Viewing himself as becoming a leader of the region, of the Muslim world, and a world leader, Erdogan seemed at first to be winning. But various conflicts with big imperialist powers and some other regional powers have begun to grow rapidly. On many critical questions such as Iran, Palestine-Israel, Syria, Egypt, building nuclear power plants in Turkey and buying large weapon systems (such as missile shield), Erdogan took unwelcomed positions which crossed the line for the US and the western imperialist powers. Breaking relations with Israel constituted an important turning point.

The political course pursued under Erdogan’s leadership has gone beyond the natural limits for a sub-imperialist power in the Middle East. And it is quite normal that such actions are punished. Although world capitalism is in a period of crisis, and there could be certain changes in the balance of forces within the system, as the law of uneven combined development creates a certain room for manoeuvre, there are limits.

The US, the majority of the big groups of Turkish capitalism, and the Gülen movement are trying to reshape Turkish politics. They want to push out Erdogan, but not the AKP. The problem is its political course — a more independent and “adventurist” orientation for Turkish capitalism. All sections of capital are pleased with the new level of development, but are less so about conflicts with big imperialist powers.

Erdogan has turned into a “pain in the ass.”

With his zeal to suppress all kinds of opposition, Erdogan puts pressure on many big capitalists. It is not possible for Turkey, with all its contradictions, to tolerate his move to authoritarianism. Erdogan’s moves will only be accepted by his cronies, the Gülenists.

The Gülen movement seeks full accord with the US’s policies; its highly educated cadres are more deeply integrated into the international capitalist system. The Gülenists are much more acceptable as Islamist partners for the USA.

Any serious move against Erdogan within the framework of bourgeois politics has to be based on strong resistance within the state. Erdogan cannot be defeated through regular political means — elections and parliamentary mechanisms. This is the meaning of the corruption investigations.

NEW BATTLES

The conflict we are witnessing today has a broader objective basis. It cannot overcome by a compromise between Gülenists and Erdoganists. The drive is to get rid of Erdogan and his ambitious policies.

New political alternatives are being developed. President Abdullah Gül from the AKP and Mustafa Saragul (candidate for Istanbul mayor) from the CHP (Republican People’s Party) side are the most prominent figures. The Gülenists support Sangul in Istanbul. We can expect until the elections there will be many more leaks and scandals.

Islamic political cadres have lost their glamour, they can no longer pose as examples of decency and integrity. This too is a new phase in the political evolution of Turkey.

One immediate consequence is that Erdogan’s dreams for a presidential or semi-presidential system are collapsed. Under siege from all sides he might step up authoritarianism.

2014 will be a year of elections and the working class will once again be forced into polarisations outside its own class interests: tailing Sangul in the name of getting rid of Erdogan or rallying behind Erdogan. This trap needs to be avoided. All sides of this conflict are enemies of the working class and they all must be challenged. Moreover, we are living through a period in which the problem does not simply involve elections. We need to be prepared for much more complicated events on a greater scale.

Getting rid of this order in which exploitation, plunder, spoil, corruption, bribery, injustice have gone rampant, in which working masses are suffering in the grip of imperialist war and economic crisis will only be possible if the working class mounts the struggle on the basis of its own independent class politics.

• Abridged and adapted from: bit.ly/erd-gul
Teachers’ dispute must escalate

By Charlotte Zeleus

Members of the National Union of Teachers will strike on Wednesday 26 March.

Talks with the Department of Education are ongoing, but the government has made it very clear that these talks will not deal with the issues at the heart of the teachers’ dispute. They will only discuss the implementation of policies, including the raising of the retirement age to 69, the end of final salary pensions, and the end of automatic annual pay progressions.

Unfortunately, the other main teaching union, NASUWT, will not strike. This has left some NUT members in schools demoralised and frustrated and where emboldened headteachers are using NASUWT’s inaction to press the advantage and keep schools open.

The refusal of other teacher unions to co-ordinate with NUT is the biggest help Michael Gove could hope for. To counter this, activists on the ground should ensure picket lines talk to NASUWT members, and that joint NUT-NASUWT meetings are set up for after the strike day to discuss escalating action in their schools jointly on workload and local pay policies.

What happens after 26 March? A well-supported dispute might force NASUWT to action. Public campaigning, street stalls, rallies and meetings that the NUT has sadly been carrying out need to be backed up with a serious industrial strategy.

This continues to be the only way to revive the dispute and give real hope to the tens of thousands of teachers who will strike on 26 March.

The attacks on teachers have increased since the 2011 pension cuts. There have been changes to national pay arrangements, and a huge expansion of academies. The NUT and the other teachers’ unions need to address some of the core issues such as national pay, pension age, and excessive workload. To restore national pay rates, reduce the unsustainable workload, and ensure that these things apply to all state-funded schools, it will be necessary to draw up a clear set of demands.

A fight for a national contract, campaigned for by teacher trade unions alongside parents and the wider public, could become a tool for breathing new life into a long-running dispute.

In February 2014, LANAC agreed to stand two candidates for the leadership of the NUT, Martin Powell-Davis for General Secretary and Patrick Murphy for Deputy General Secretary. This is an important step in challenging the existing leadership and its current (lack of) “strategy”. Patrick and Martin have consistently argued and voted on the Executive for escalating, coordinating, and planning a calendar of industrial action as well as a more independent and assertive approach to winning NASUWT to action.

However challenging, the current NUT leadership electorially is not an end in itself. This must be part of opening up a serious discussion about industrial strategy throughout all layers of the union.

• More: nultan.org.uk

The left in the London NUT elections

By Martin Thomas

In the NUT Executive elections for Inner London, for which ballot papers were posted out on 19 March, the SWP has allied with Alex Kenny to try to remove Martin Powell-Davies from the Exec.

Powell-Davies is a member of the Socialist Party, but has consistently been among those on the NUT Exec arguing for ongoing and escalating industrial action focused on definite demands (not just an appeal to Tory minister Michael Gove to “consider compromise” with the NUT).

Nominally the Exec has a left majority; but in fact every major vote has been decided by a de facto alliance of the CPDU (one of the left factions), the “soft left” of the STA (another left faction), and the in-cumbent full-time officials, with the old right wing.

Kenny is the leading figure in that STA “soft left” and an Inner London Exec member. In the current election he is campaigning jointly with SWPer Jess Edwards to remove Powell-Davies from the Exec.

The leaflets from Kenny and Edwards say little other than that they like education and dislike Gove, but their hope must be that Edwards will win enough votes on the strength of being a woman and a primary teacher to displace Powell-Davies.

Solidarity urges Inner London teachers to vote for Powell-Davies, who will also be contesting the next NUT General Secretary election in an alliance with AWL member Patrick Murphy as candidate for Deputy General Secretary.

The election is a test of the current leadership as well as an opportunity for rank-and-file delegates to address this, and delegates pledged to propose to their branches action to secure representation for women.

12.5% of the membership, 0% of the leadership

By an RMT Women’s Conference delegate

The Women’s Conference of transport union RMT, held on 7-8 March in Glasgow, saw a new determination to campaign against sexism and for women workers’ rights and to tackle the under-representation of women within the union.

Guest speakers included North Ayrshire and Arran Labour MP (and RMT Parliamentary group member) Katy Clark and Scottish TUC Assistant Secretary (and former railworker and RMT activist) Ann Henderson.

The conference passed a resolution noting that next year marks 100 years since the first woman joined RMT’s predecessor the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), and calling on the union to organise centenary events.

A century on, women are 12.5% of the union’s membership but 0% of its national leadership, as all RMT’s officers and national executive members are men.

The union’s current internal structures review provides an opportunity to address this, and delegates pledged to propose to their branches action to secure representation for women.

The Conference passed four other resolutions:
• giving factual information about domestic violence in order to expose common myths and challenge victim-blaming, and asking the union to train union representatives on the issue;
• on “distressing and isolating” sexual assault and harassment at work, asserting that “RMT should be able to offer the best possible support for women in these situations and should try to tackle the culture where this behaviour arises”;
• demanding improved maternity and parental leave;
• expressing opposition to the publication on the union’s website of a poster advertising a charity fundraising event that included the sexist portrayal of a bikini-clad “ring girl”.

Conference delegates were excited and inspired by presentations from rank-and-file delegates about international campaigns: Becky Crocker and Christine Willett had attended the International Transport Workers’ Federation’s Women’s Conference in New Delhi.

Janine Booth reported on the work of the European Transport Workers’ Federation’s Women’s Committee.

Ealing hospital workers’ seven-day strike

By Ira Berkovic

Outsourced health workers at Ealing Hospital in West London struck for seven days from Friday 14 March.

They are currently paid £6.31 an hour, 44% less than the lowest-paid directly-employed NHS staff. The workers are employed by Medirest, an outsourcing company which provides domestics, porters, catering workers, and other staff services. They are members of the GMB union and have already struck for four days since the start of 2014.

Bosses have offered a pay increase to 2015, but the workers are holding out for terms closer to those of their directly-employed NHS colleagues, including improved sick pay, which they do not currently receive.

Cleaning workers at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SAOS) in central London struck again on Friday 21 March. They are fighting for the same terms and conditions as directly-employed workers. For more, see bit.ly/soas-4jc
Self-determination for Ukraine!

By Colin Foster

Ukrainians are a nation. The nation includes both those who have Ukrainian as first language, and those who have Russian as first language. Just as the Irish nation includes many who have English as first language.

Ukrainians are a nation long oppressed under Russian and other foreign rule. They have a right to self-determination.

Within Ukraine, there is exceptionally sharp class inequality. A few oligarchs are hugely wealthy and pay few taxes. The majority are much poorer even than in neighbouring Belarus or Romania.

The movement which got rid of Ukraine’s corrupt president Yanukovych was against both Yanukovych’s subservience to Russia, and his social policies.

The social revolt can win only by also taking on the new Ukrainian government, dominated by oligarchs. As it takes on that government it will also take on the IMF and the Western banks, which hold Ukraine in hock.

Between oligarchs and inequality, and oligarchs and inequality plus national oppression, Ukrainians, rightly, prefer to be rid of the national oppression.

The duty of socialists and democrats, therefore, is both to support the whole people of Ukraine against Russian threats and possible invasion, and to support Ukraine’s left and Ukraine’s working class against the oligarchs and the banks.

Russian troops out! Demand the Western powers backed Ukraine’s debt! Support the Ukrainian left in its efforts to create a “third pole” against the oligarchs of all stripes.

On 21 November 2013 the crisis was opened by Yanukovych, under Russian pressure, cancelling a deal with the EU.

After three months of escalating street demonstrations, strongest in western Ukraine but also spreading to the east and centred in Kiev, which has a Russian-first-language majority, Yanukovych fled on 22 February and Ukraine’s elected parliament appointed a new government.

On 27 February Russian troops went on to the streets in Crimea, surrounded the Crimean parliament, and forced the creation of a new Crimean government led by a pro-Russian party which got just three seats out of 100 in Crimean’s last elections.

On 17 days of escalating Russian military intervention in Crimea, that Russian-installed government ran a referendum on 16 March, boycotted by Crimea’s indigenous Tatar people and many Ukrainians, which of course showed a majority for Crimea being reintegrated into Russia.

On 21 March Russia annexed Crimea. The same day, Ukraine’s government signed a deal for links with the EU.

Some socialists describe Ukraine’s deal with the EU as symmetrical with Russian annexation. However bad EU policies are — and in Greece they are despicable — the equation is false. Even a workers’ state would sign trade and association deals with capitalist powers, and have to accommodate, to some degree, to the rapacious rules of the capitalist world market.

Being invaded and ruled by a foreign power is different. The US and EU powers have been hesitant about sanctions against Russia, because some EU countries in particular fear losing Russian gas supplies and profits from trade with Russia, but they have imposed sanctions on some Russian oligarchs.

On 23 March a NATO chief warned that Russia was massing troops on Ukraine’s eastern border. The Russian government denied it. On 24 March Ukraine told all its troops to withdraw from Crimea for their own safety.

Putin’s army may invade eastern Ukraine to secure the areas which supply Crimea, or to annex a strip of land along the south of Ukraine, connecting Russia to the Russian-military-occupied area of Trans-Dniester in Moldova. Or it may just use its military threat, and its ability to stir up sections of the Russian (not just Russian-speaking) minority in eastern Ukraine, as leverage to pull the whole of Ukraine back under its domination.

On 23 March, surprisingly, Alexander Lukashenko, the thuggish and usually very Russian-aligned president of Belarus, commented ruefully that “a bad precedent has been created” by Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

Even usually pro-Russian people in the region are alarmed by Putin’s imperialism.

Putin threatens all of Ukraine

The Autonomous Workers’ Union, an anarcho-syndicalist group in Ukraine, has appealed for international working-class solidarity against Putin’s aggression.

On February 27, 2014, pro-Russian chauvinists of Crimea, supported by Berkut riot police and Russian Black Sea Fleet committed a military coup in Crimea.

Right now it’s already obvious that Ukraine wasn’t the government of “Russian Unity” movement headed by Aksionov is no more than a puppet of the Kremlim regime.

We don’t regard Ukraine’s territorial integrity and inviolability of its borders as a value, we are against violent “pacification” of Crimea, but we think that the status of Crimea should be defined with due regard to the opinion of the Crimean Tatar minority.

The latest events show that Putin is not going to limit himself with the annexation of Crimea. The aim of the imperialist Kremlin regime is to expand the Russian practices on all the territory of Ukraine.

Thereby the Russian regime proved to be the main threat to the interests of the proletariat at the post-Soviet area.

We are opponents of war and militarism. But we think that in this situation conscious proletarians can rely on nobody but themselves.

There’s no point in waiting for “rescue” from Nato. Ukrainian nationalist politicians can only organise defence of a part of the territory at best. The war can be averted only if proletarians of all countries, first and foremost Ukrainian and Russian, together make a stand against the criminal regime of Putin.

Joint action by the Ukrainian and Russian proletariat and all progressive democratic forces which will put an end to Putin’s regime, will also mean an end to the current neoliberal-oriented nationalist regime in Ukraine.

While for the leftists and anarchists of the West it’s high time to cut ties with the so-called “anti-imperialism” which comes down to support of Putin’s regime, we have no peace between classes!


Birmingham student victory

The campaign against police and management victimisation of student activists in Birmingham has ended in victory.

Following protest at Birmingham University in January at which police knelt, attacked and arrested dozens of students, and the university suspended the arrestees and banned them from campus, all charges have now been dropped and all students re-instated.

This victory comes after a letter, signed by 223 members of academic staff, was delivered to university management to condemn the suspensions and their implications for freedom of speech and protest.

The University branches of Unison and UCU came out in support, voting to back the suspended students and join the campaign. The Guild of Students and Birmingham UCU, were also due to demonstrate on Wednesday 26 March.