CAP PAY-OUTS TO RICH, NOT OUR BENEFITS!

See page 5

Households with disabled people have been hardest hit by benefit cuts.
What is the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty?

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists’ relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.

Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity.

The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers’ control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats’ and managers’ privileges.

We fight for the labour movement to break with “social partnership” and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses. Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers’ struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

We stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers’ government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers’ charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and so for all.
- A workers’ movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Black and white workers’ unity against racism.
- Open borders.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.
- If you agree with us, please take some copies of Solidarity to sell — and join us!

Contact us:

020 7394 8923 solidarity@workersliberty.org

The editor (Cathy Nugent), 20e Tower Workshops, Riley Road, London, SE1 3DG.

Printed by Trinity Mirror

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What's the Alliance for Workers' Liberty doing?

By Michael Johnson

Francois Hollande’s governing Socialist Party (PS) lost control of around 155 towns and cities in France’s municipal elections on 30 March. There was a strong showing for the far-right Front National (FN) and a 30.00% for the centre-right UMP.

In what is already being dubbed “Black Sunday”, voters sought to punish Hollande — who is now polling as the most unpopular President of the Fifth Republic. His only consolation is that the PS held Paris, with Anne Hidalgo succeeding Bertrand Delanoë to become the city’s first woman mayor.

Hollande reshuffled his government on 1 April, with Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault standing down. He was replaced by Interior Minister Manuel Valls, a self-described “Blairiste” and “Climtonian”.

Valls is on the right of the party, and is often compared to former President Nicolas Sarkozy for his ambition and hard-line stance on crime and security issues. His promotion has already led to the departure of Cécile Duflot, one of the Green ministers in the government, and threatens to further divide the ruling PS.

Voters were discontented with rising unemployment, which currently sits at around 10%. Working-class voters are angry at cuts intended to reduce France’s budget deficit, while the more wealthy resist tax rises, especially the abolition of former President Sarkozy’s “tax holiday” on overtime.

In Le Monde, Jean-Luc Mélenchon from Front de Gauche blamed Hollande and his “turn rightwards, the government’s preferred alliance with the [French employers’ organisation] MEDEF, and its submission to European austerity policies. These have produced a disaster.”

The FN won in 11 towns of over 9,000 inhabitants, surpassing their previous high-point in the mid-90s when they were briefly in control of four town halls. Though most of the towns are small, the FN now also controls the diverse 7th district of Marseilles, home to 150,000 people in France’s second city. This gives them a strong base on which to build going in to the European elections in May, in which they are expected to poll in second place ahead of the PS.

Nonna Mayer, research director at the Centre of European Studies at Sciences Po (Paris Institute of Political Science), told the Guardian: “It’s the first time the Front National has organised such an electoral dynamic in local elections. Voters are so tired of the economic situation and they have the feeling that the left and the right have been unable to find a solution. … They say we have tried everything, why not try the Front National.”

This was echoed by the former Nouveau Parti anti-capitaliste (NPA) presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot, who pointed to the 38% abstention rate as proof that “the political system has been reduced to ashes” and called vaguely for a “democratic insurrection.”

The Socialist Mayor of Farciennes in Belgium has suspended relations with its “sister city” Beaucarne, which elected an FN mayor. The Mayor of Arlon, twinned with Hayange, has proposed the same. These symbolic actions will, of course, be little consolation for those at the sharp end of the FN’s racism in France.

The main victor in the election was the centre-right UMP opposition, which has sought to undermine the government’s legitimacy by offering a power-sharing arrangement.

Exit polls show that the UMP won around 49% of the vote to the PS’s 24%. It captured the city of Toulouse, as well as a slew of towns traditionally run by the left, including Limoges, which had been left-controlled since 1912.

French right and far right make gains

March in March: Australian indignados

By Riki Lane

It seemed to come from nowhere, then it was everywhere. It was against everything, but not clearly for anything.

It was the largest political mobilisation for years, but the mainstream media virtually ignored it. It was inspiring and revolting for workers, union and community activists, but had little support from the larger campaigns and parties.

“March in March” on March 15-17 brought over 100,000 people onto the streets against the Abbott government’s policies — over 30,000 in Melbourne. Rallies were held in all cities and dozens of regional towns. Initiated through social media by a few rural individuals, the call spread rapidly, meeting the broad feelings of discontent with the attacks on so many fronts. Refugees, climate change, union rights, civil rights — these were prominent issues, but among dozens.

Like almost all the left, I was surprised by the numbers. Awareness crept up as I realised friends and family who do not usually attend rallies were going to this one.

Clearly this form of broad non-specific protest met the mood. People sick of the constant attacks from governments of ALP and Coalition alike. There were echoes of the “indignados”, of generalised opposition to neoliberalism.

March in March was not built by the larger campaigning groups and parties such as GetUp, Amnesty International the Greens or the ALP.

The organisers’ politics were mild, summed up in their overused slogan of “Australians united for a better government”. They emphasised after the rally that they were not “the left” but all people.

Yet its sheer broadness and lack of control by larger groups allowed an enormous range of smaller community groups, campaigns, unions and parties to mobilise. In my case, it was building a rally for a local campaign against an environmentally destructive and economically ridicuous Tollway (the Melbourne East-West Tunnel).

The marches marked the re-emergence of a fighting spirit amongst tens of thousands of workers and activists. Yet mass media coverage was minimal – both of the lead up and the rallies themselves. The little coverage focused on angry slogans directed at prime minister Tony Abbott and the government – complaining these were “hateful”. You would of the Murdoch press, but the usually left-liberal ABC, SBS and Fairfax media also found little worth reporting.

There are plans for follow up marches on 30-31 August 2014

- www.marshaustralia.com
- www.greenleft.org.au/node/56111
Students discuss six months of struggle

By Beth Redmond

The National Union of Students conference [8-10 April, Liverpool] comes after six months which have seen important struggles. There have been two main issues: workers’ rights on campus and repression against student activists. The two are connected, because the relatively big movement for “cops off campus” at the end of last year was sparked by management and police repression against student solidarity actions with campus workers. The biggest flashpoint was University of London, the site of the very important Tres Cosas campaign by outsourced cleaning and maintenance workers, and of heavy repression against student protests supporting it. The other two universities to suffer the worst repression, Birmingham and Sussex, have also seen student action in support of workers’ struggles.

Campaigns uniting students with workers on their campuses (often Living Wage campaigns) have been appearing, all over the country, although at a relatively low level. NUS is heavily bureaucratised and politically right wing. But there are all kinds of struggles which will find some expression at its conference because of the intervention of the left-wing network National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCACF), which includes AWL students. NCACF-sympathetic student unions have proposed policy to the conference on these issues, including spreading the example of campaigns like Tres Cosas, support for the upcoming lecturers’ marking boycott, the demand for a maximum pay ratio in education, and the demand for police not to be allowed on campus without permission from the student union.

They have also submitted motions on NUS’s demands and strategy over education funding, cuts, student housing, jobs and rights at work, anti-racism, the NHS and the general election. As well as contributing to these proposals, Workers’ Liberty students have successfully pushed for the submission of more “political” motions on issues including expropriating the banks, Ukraine, commemorating the miners’ strike – and Europe. Shockingly, UKIP feel confident enough to stand a candidate for NUS President. Our motion seeks to commit NUS to a serious fight against nationalism and anti-UKIP in particular.

The NCACF will hold fringe events and produce a daily bulletin. It is also standing candidates for NUS’s national executive, both for the full-time officer positions – including AWL member Daniel Cooper for President — and for the part-time “Block of 15”.

In the year running up to the general election, with the Tories refusing to rule out higher fees and Labour currently putting forward no clear policy, NUS’s lack of political radicalism and drive could be disastrous.

The consolidation of an effective, co-ordinated left-wing bloc inside NUS is important. More: anticusl.com


Left candidate for President

Daniel Cooper is a member of Workers’ Liberty, Vice President of University of London Union, and the left’s candidate for NUS President. He said: “NUS has had little if anything to do with the most dynamic, exciting student struggles of the last year. As mounting repression is used to help impose marketisation on our education system, it has stood aside. It is sleeping walking into the year of a General Election, with big threats and opportunities for the student movement. NCACF’s [National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts] campaign has given a political expression to grassroots student struggles, and raised the possibility of a national perspective for the student movement radically different from the timidity, management speak and bureaucracy of NUS. I hope it will succeed in consolidating a stronger left inside NUS, linked to grassroots activists and struggles.

“We need to use the conference as a launch pad to get the student left better organised, more united, more active and more political.”


Birmingham: justice on our side

The 13 students who were arrested at a demonstration in Birmingham on 29 January have had their criminal investigations discontinued, and the remaining two out of five students who had been suspended have been re-instated.

The win came at the end of a eight week long battle with university management, who have unsuccessfully tried to bully a minority of students into silence and out of activism on campus.

On 20 February management reinstated three of the five after an open letter condemning the university’s actions was signed by 5,700 people, including Clare Short and Noam Chomsky. The remaining two students had no access to their personal tutors, seminars, lectures, welfare and counselling services, and were not able to hand in any academic work, and the Student Loans Company was demanding money from them due to their studies being “interrupted”.

A demo was called for Wednesday 26 March, and people from Edinburgh, Liverpool and London came together in Birmingham to help build for the demonstration.

An open letter was published the same week, signed by 228 staff members and academics at Birmingham University and delivered to the Vice Chancellor.

The day before the demo, the two suspended students were informed they could continue their studies. Despite being initially unsupportive, the Guild of students backed the demonstration, as did UCU, and it went ahead. One of the final two sus - pended students, Kelly Rogers, spoke to Solidarity: “The campaign brought out people from every corner: students from Birmingham and around the country, academics, support staff, MPs, members of the public. It was a broad campaign centred on the basic principle of innocent until proven guilty, and justice.

“That’s why it won. Ultimately, it’s completely untenable for universities and the police to continue singing out and punishing students before trial. The verdict was appreciated more than I can say, and I think we have shown that when students get singular out, there is a national network to support and defend them.”


Spanish students strike against cuts

By Rachael Barnes

Students from universities all over Spain went on a 48-hour strike last Wednesday, called by the national students’ union. They struck to oppose cuts to education spending, to demand the resignation of Education Minister Jose Ignacio Wert, who has introduced the education reform, and to protest against new restrictions on access to grants for both living costs and tuition fees. In order to get a grant, studen t s must obtain a certain grade in their entrance exams.

The funding cuts and grant restrictions are justified as stabilising Spain’s public finances. They have come at a time where unemployment is 26%, and it is reported that two million young Spaniards have had to leave university because they could no longer afford to study.

Thousands of people have come together in Madrid since 22 March to protest against poverty and EU-imposed austerity.

On the first day of the strike, protesters at the Complutense University in Madrid, set fire to bins and used them to build barricades to block traffic on the main road through the university. An occupation of a student services building had been ongoing and at the request of the university was emptied by around 100 police officers. 33 people had been arrested by the end of the first day.

Around 150 students built barricades on the second day of the strike while many others marched, but all police vans had left Complutense University’s campus in the morning.

This was one of 70 protests nationwide, with university students, school students, workers and parents.

On our website:

Report of Left Unity policy conference bit.ly/1s3BgF2


Threat to annuities

Robin Blackburn, author of Age Shock: How Finance is failing us and other books, comments on pension changes made in George Osborne’s Budget.

I can understand why there has been a backlash. Criticise allowing holders of pension plans to cash out their pension pot rather than being forced to buy an annuity at retirement. In recent years, with miserable in - come, annuities would barely keep pace with inflation.

However this measure will offer greatest rewards to those with higher incomes. About half of all tax relief goes to the top 10 per cent of earners. To those with small pension pots — say, £10,000 or £20,000 — it will bring welcome flexibility but is not a big deal.

A dwindling number of people are covered by “final salary” or “defined benefit” schemes, and the measures will probably not have major impact on them. For the majority the new arrangements will do nothing, or very little.

Osborne claims that he is enhancing “choice”, but the likelihood is that he will be destroying or degrading the workings of the annuities market. Annuities work best when large numbers are obliged to pool their risk — in this case the risk of outliving your pension.

If the well-off are to get a handsome bonus, and if annuities are threatened, it would be only fair to come up with benefit for those left out — and, if possible, to make sure that annuities survive and prosper.

These desirable outcomes could be secured by setting up a publicly owned and guaranteed annuity scheme to be financed by a share levy on banks and other corporations, equivalent to 10 per cent of their annual profits, along the lines I outlined in Age Shock: How Finance is Failing Us.

Membership of this scheme would be open to all and it would furnish a safety net for pensioners. It would offer reasonable annuity rates to any extra enti - tlement that a member wished to purchase from the National Annuity Fund.

It would be set up as tax - exempt, and the advantage of risk pooling to all tak - ing part.
Pursuing alternatives

Letters

Martin Thomas’ article, ‘A “trade-union” party?’, (Solidarity 316) ends by saying: “If the idea (for the unions to set up their own semi-party tied to Labour) gains support, as it may do after the CLPD (Campaign for Labour Party Democracy) AGM, then further discussion will be needed.”

No one could disagree with that. Indeed the mere fact that CLPD is discussing such a proposal suggests we need more discussion now regardless of the result of their AGM vote.

CLPD, which was founded in 1973, describes itself as “a pressure group within the Labour Party advocating changes in the party to make it more accountable to rank-and-file members”. That now a significant number in this organisation are considering at least a partial detour from work solely through the Labour Party’s structures should give us all pause for thought.

The realignment of the unions and the Labour Party in a common defence against the cuts that the Coalition were imposing, which some of us envisaged in 2010, has not materialised. There is, as indeed there was during the Blair/Brown government, some unity between the leaders of the unions and the leaders of the Labour Party, but this has been to prevent any meaningful opposition to the cuts, not to promote it.

Despite the union leaders’ protests, they have accepted the Collins report and seem ready to allow themselves to be sidelined even further from any influence in policy making within the party. Given this, it is surely revolutionaries’ duty to pursue all alternatives for re-founding some sort of working-class political voice.

Rather than pointing out the potential problems with the proposed semi-party as Martin does in his article, we should welcome this potential development.

We should consider it as one of the possible tools we might utilise to gain working-class political representation alongside work within the Labour Party and standing independent socialist propaganda candidates.


One-sided culture

Discussing why the old Italian socialist movement had failed so badly in and after World War One, Antonio Gramsci saw it as having been dominated an oratorical culture, lacking the theoretical depth for which a stronger stream of written debate would have been needed.

Registering the difficulties facing the internationalists in Germany in World War One, Rosa Luxemburg noted ruefully that her comrade Franz Mehring was interested only in literary efforts, not in getting out onto the streets and into the factories to agitate by word of mouth.

Gramsci was not dismissing speeches, and Rosa Luxemburg did not think that articles and pamphlets were useless. Each argued only that a one-sided culture limited the left.

Discussing the harmful effects on the left of a one-sided culture dominated by Facebook and smartphones (bit.ly/fb-cpa), I argued that the “root of [the problems is] not technology but defeats for the labour movement... etc.”

Bruce Robinson (Solidarity 316, bit.ly/fb-cpa) presents me as “explain[ing] the problems as individual failings” and “psychology”, and “calling on activists to leave Facebook”. The reader probably gets a picture of me as a old sourpuss scratching away with my quill pen.

I use Facebook. I no more want to suppress new technologies than Gramsci wanted to stop Italian socialists making speeches, or Luxemburg wanted Mehring to stop writing articles.

Gramsci’s understanding of the broad social and historical reasons for the “oratorical culture” in Italian socialism didn’t oblige him to say: “Ah well, there are big social reasons why the comrades don’t read. And anyway there is no absolute barrier to acquiring complex ideas by oratory alone. No point urging individuals to read. Go with the flow.”

Equally, Luxemburg wasn’t obliged to conclude: “It’s just history. No point urging anyone to get out and agitate.”

Understanding the roots of Facebook culture in “recent developments in capitalism”, likewise, does not debar us from urging our comrades to read and to talk face-to-face when we see them relying on Facebook to learn about world news — or inform themselves about debates, or sending people Facebook messages about activities as a substitute for actually talking with them and explain and motivate.

Bruce writes that it is “utopian” to think that “an upturn in class struggle [will] drag internet activists from Facebook into the streets”. He surely can’t mean that. Is the only upturn in class struggle we can hope for an increase in “likes” on left-wing images and pages on Facebook?

When those who now find face-to-face politics, or “heavy” political reading, too much, and who prefer to limit themselves to “knocking around on social media with people who broadly think the same way”, find the confidence to come on the streets, they will want more than a Facebook status as their intellectual sustenance and their active contribution.

The sustenance they’ll find, and the channels for activity they find, will depend on how many individuals we have “dragged from Facebook into the streets” (and the meetings, and the study groups) in advance, to create an active and educated on-the-streets socialist movement.

RS21 has public launch

The Left
By Martin Thomas

About 120 attended the political weekend organised on 29-30 March by RS21, the most recent splitter from the SWP.

A few of us from AWL attended. There were also a few from ISN (the group which split from the SWP in early 2013). No other left groups chose to attend.

Generally, the discussions were interesting and open. There was much less of the tone of “a therapy session, not a political meeting” about this event than there was about the public launch event of the ISN in June 2013; much less of a mood of relief at being out of the SWP and no longer having to sell papers or do street stalls or such, and being able to spend time Facebooking and blogging instead.

RS21’s next large public event is a one-day conference on ecosocialism, organised jointly with Socialist Resistance, on 7 June. RS21 will launch a regular publication in May. It has already produced a small bulletin.

Jen Wilkinson, summing up for RS21 in the final session, said that RS21 had not yet formulated its perspectives, but was resolved to work at doing so: “We can’t just sit around for the next 12 months saying we need a perspective. We need to start doing it”.

The ISN circulated a leaflet entitled “a letter to a RS21 member”, asking RS21 to join the unity talks which ISN has with Socialist Resistance, Workers’ Power, and the remnants of the ACL. That suggestion was not discussed over the weekend.

Speaking in the final session, I proposed on behalf of AWL that RS21 and ourselves should deal with each other on the basis of unity in action where we agree, and honest debate where we disagree.

I proposed specifically that RS21 and AWL should work together to defend free debate on university campuses and stir up opposition to the current mood to ban the SWP. A number of leading RS21ers with whom we talked were very clear against the “banning”, and they said they would discuss, in their steering group, action to promote that opposition.

As an example of an issue on which AWL and RS21 would probably disagree, I cited Europe. I was pleasantly surprised to be told by an RS21er after the session that RS21 does not necessarily accept the long-standing SWP line of “get Britain out of the EU”.

I was disappointed that the weekend included almost no explicit examination of the SWP’s political record and tradition, and of what from that RS21 plans to continue and what to replace. Maybe I’m being unfair on the basis of only one meeting. We’ll see.

The job for AWL, I think, is to adopt the same approach to RS21 as we advocate they approach us: unity in action where we agree, honest and comradesly debate where we disagree.

• Abridged from a longer report at bit.ly/rs-21

Building the new, transforming the old

Over a hundred people, from all over the country and from a wide variety of trade unions and workplaces, took part in the New Unionism 2014 conference Workers’ Liberty co-hosted with other groups on 29 March.

Growing debate and discussion about “new unionism” is being driven by a need for a revived trade union movement in the face of the Tories’ assault and equally obvious failure of the unions as they currently exist to meet this challenge.

Discussions included: the experience “new unions”, like the IWGB among London cleaners and facilities workers and the “pop up union” at Sussex University; struggles to renovate and transform existing, bureaucratised “mainstream” unions.

Despite some gaps, it was a thought-provoking, inspiring and useful day. Workers’ Liberty would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who helped to organise the conference and took part. And we would like to invite others in the labour movement and on the left who want to pursue these issues to discuss with us about how to do so.
Cap pay-outs to the rich!

On 26 March the coalition government voted through a law to “cap” welfare benefits for future years. Most Labour MPs voted for the “cap”. Only 13 rebelled.

We should instead “cap” the huge pay-outs being made to the rich.

Inequality in Britain has been rising since 1979, and is now soaring. Real wages, on average, are still going down, despite all the talk of economic recovery.

The average household will have lost £760 a year by 2014-5 from the welfare cuts already made by the coalition government. Poorer households lose more than the average, and households with disabled people lose most of all.

At the same time, bankers’ bonuses increased by an average of 29%, worldwide, between 2013 and 2014. Pay for the average boss of a top-hundred (FTSE 100) company was up to £4.3 million in 2012, an increase of 10 per cent on the previous year. In 2010-11, FTSE 100 bosses took an average pay rise of 12%.

But the government sees the economic threat as one of the poorest getting too much, not the billionaires getting too much. Its new law aims to guarantee that if there is economic difficulty, then the burden falls first on the worse-off, regu-

lerative by the “cap”.

Or, if economic output booms, then the gains go to the rich, and the worse-off are debarred by the “cap” from recouping some of what we have lost since 2010.

The benefit “cap” is in line with capitalist principles, and shows up the brutality of those principles.

The labour movement should instead go for a “cap” on pay-outs to the rich. The only way that “cap” could be enforced effectively is by taking the big industries under public ownership and democratic control.

Call Labour MPs to account

These are the 13 Labour MPs who voted against the benefit cap. If your Labour MP, or a Labour MP whom your union sponsors, is not on the list, propose a motion to call them to account!

Diane Abbott, Ronnie Campbell, Katy Clark, Michael Connarty, Jeremy Corbyn, Kelvin Hopkins, Glenda Jackson, John McDonnell, George Mudie, Linda Riordan, Dennis Skinner, Tom Watson, Mike Wood.

Graphics on left from Equality Trust

Help us raise £12,000 by October

This year, Workers’ Liberty will celebrate May Day by marching in London with our Iranian comrades and by hosting a “Marxist Revival” event geared toward sharing experiences of class struggle with people from all over the world. In collaboration with the Iranian Revolutionary Marxists’ Tendency, the Turkish revolutionary socialist group Marksist Tutm and Workers’ Liberty Australia, we have produced the first issue of a new journal of international discussion among revolutionary socialists.

In order to continue developing these links with international revolutionaries, by hosting events and producing literature, we rely on donations from people who support our work.

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 2HB. 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 £650. Includes an increased standing order and donations. Thanks to Colin and Dan.

Grand total: £2654.
Cuba’s new oppositions

By Sam Farber

55 years after Cuba’s revolution overthrowing the Batista dictatorship, its original generation of leadership has begun to pass away and the future of its “socialist” project remains uncertain.

Will it experience capitalist “shock therapy” like the countries of the former Eastern bloc? Will it follow the state-capitalist road established in China and Vietnam? Will economic liberalization be accompanied, as some claim, by an expansion of political freedoms and tolerance for dissent? A socialist democracy may not be on the cards; if so, what does that mean for the nascent critical left on the island? What we know about these new tendencies is limited and few Cubans speak openly about their political preferences, but we can still sketch out the changing landscape of politics on the island.

[Raul] Castro’s political programme has prompted the release of most long-term political prisoners, greater acknowledgment of and efforts to mitigate racial and gender discrimination, and the opening of some migration out of and into Cuba. There has been a relaxation of administrative rules, and concessions to popular demands, without recognizing any citizen rights independent of the government’s discretion, and a significant degree of political and cultural liberalization. Yet there has been no concomitant democratization that would allow a challenge to the Cuban Communist Party’s monopoly on power.

The focal point of Castro’s economic reforms is an attempt to revitalize the Cuban economy through the adoption of elements of the Sino-Vietnamese model — a state-capitalism that retains a monopoly of political power through a single party, which controls the strategic sectors of the economy, such as banking, while sharing the rest with a private sector both foreign and domestic. But unlike in China and Vietnam, Cuban economic liberalization has been obstructed at key turns — not at the grassroots, but by sectors of the bureaucracy afraid that the implementation of Chinese-style reforms will turn to state capitalism, but there’s no concrete evidence that’s actually the case. The steps already taken have been relatively modest: allowing state companies to keep 50 percent of profits for recapitalization and the freedom to make decisions about minor investments and wage raises. These measures were enacted as part of a 2012 Communist Party program aimed at establishing enterprise autonomy, which promised (but by and large has not delivered) bigger changes like partially decentralizing prices and terminating poorly-performing state companies through liquidation, privatization, or conversion to cooperatives.

**Mixed Economy**

Castro’s economic reforms have garnered institutional support from a group of economists working at the Centro de Estudios de la Economía Cubana (CEECE). Despite voicing concerns about his program’s limited scope, they have dubbed it a welcome step towards the establishment of a state-directed mixed economy.

Most prominent of these advocates are Omar Everlén Pérez-Villanueva and Pavel Vidal Alejandro. For Piñeiro Harnecker, who also works at the CEEC but does not share Pérez-Villanueva and Pavel Vidal Alejandro. For Piñeiro Harnecker, who also works at the CEEC but does not share, these “economicists” see autonomous enterprise guided by private interests as the most effective and efficient way to coordinate economic activities. Concerns regarding the consequences of privatizing the economy — that it would increase inequality and speed environmental destruction — should, in their view, be largely left for later. Measures can be taken to mitigate them, however, such as a tax system to regulate the income gap and the adoption of laws that protect customers, workers, and the environment — a stance reminiscent of Third Way social democrats in Europe.

According to Piñeiro Harnecker, these “economicists” see the Cuban Catholic hierarchy would likely prefer a Cuban transition with an important political party tied to Catholic traditions, like the Christian Democratic parties that exist in Europe and Latin America. The Church knows, however, that a party of this kind, which already exists in exile, does not have popular roots on the island and would not be able to lay claim to the Cuban version of the authoritarian Sino-Vietnamese model. It has thus opted to push for the implementation of a Catholic social agenda that advocates “reforms” limiting abortion and divorce, expanding its role in higher education and instituting religious education in public schools, a demand that is the Cuban Catholic hierarchy since the first half of the 20th century.

**“Patriotic”**

One of the editors of the Catholic magazine Espacio Laical, Lenier González Mederos, a lay spokesperson for the Church, has used it to implicitly propose a political impact between the Church and the military. He describes the two institutions as likely to remain “unscathed” for the next 200 years, arguing that “the Armed Forces, together with the Catholic Church, has the patriotic and moral responsibility to watch for and facilitate the best of possible futures for Cuba.”

While using Espacio Laical to project a liberal and social-democratic image, the Church has also been publishing Pueblo Nuevo, the official organ of the Archdiocese of Havana, to promote conservative views. Setting the political tone of the magazine, its editor, the Archdiocese’s official spokesperson Orlando Márquez, declared in an article “Sin miedo a la riqueza [Without Fear of Wealth]” that the emergence of an affluent stratum is a welcome symptom of prosperity on the island and rejected the notion that “there is anything problematic with burgeoning economic inequality.”

What has happened to the left of Cuba’s political center? Since the economic crisis provoked by the collapse of the Soviet bloc, a liberal Communist tendency critical of various aspects of Cuban society but loyal to the regime has been developing among the elite academic circles on the island. This liberal Communist camp is best represented in Temas, which has become the most important social science and in-

*Many poor and working-class people, particularly those who do not get remittances from abroad, see no alternative to emigration or law-breaking*
also challenged, albeit implicitly, the old official government. Hernández, are loyal to the system but are propelled by their interest and the mood among Cuba’s populace. If he has identified popular discontent, he has been unafraid to publish a diluted version of that discontent—but always within the bounds of acceptable discourse set by the regime.

Breaking taboos, he warned that the people in the government were strengthening their own positions to transfer state management has been a relative lack of attention to the electoral agenda, there is no point to put forward such a perspective. But it is this political vision advocating for the necessity for planning at the national level and the fact that the CCP will inevitably dominate that planning unless its political monopoly is abolished. The Yugoslavian experience of the last century shows that authentic self-management at the local level can only function if there is economic planning that is national in scope, but does not neglect democratic workplace participation. Decisions concerning vital questions such as accumulation and consumption, wages, taxes, and social services affect the whole society and significantly limit what can be decided in each work center—new structures are needed to facilitate exchange between them.

In the case of Observatorio Crítico, its lack of attention to the party and the state may be due to the growing influence of anarchism, a political ideology that predominated the Cuban labor movement in the late 19th and early 20th century but was virtually eliminated by the rise of the Communist-led unions in the 1920s. Some of today’s Cuban left-wing critics have begun to turn to anarchism—which, whatever its many flaws, has had an honorable political record on the island—as a past that validates their own politics.

Cuba’s ongoing process of moral decay and social breakdown, denounced even by Castro himself, is a reflection of a political and socioeconomic system to which many poor and working-class people—particularly the 40 percent of the population which does not receive remittances from abroad—have no alternative to emigration or law-breaking. With the passing of the historic generation of revolutionary leaders in the next five to ten years, a new political landscape will emerge where oppositional political action may resurface. Some could argue that since socialism of a democratic and revolutionary orientation is not likely to be on the immediate agenda, there is no point to put forward such a perspective. But it is this political vision advocating for the democratic self-management of Cuban society that can shape a compelling resistance for what is likely to come. Through cultivating solidarity with those most vulnerable and calling for class, racial, and gender equality, a future movement can build a united front against old and emerging oppressors.

In that vision lies hope for the people of Cuba and the broader region.

- First published in Jacobin online magazine. Slightly abridged here.
- Full text: bit.ly/sf-cuba
At the end of March, the International Labour Organisation’s Bureau for Workers’ Activities (known as ILO-AC-TRAV) and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding “to promote Trade Unions South-South Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region”.

The Director-General of the ILO, Guy Ryder, said “we need to find a way which so that the ACFTU can work more closely with other parts of the international trade union movement, sharing common objectives.”

Ryder is a former General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, which has decided to invite the ACFTU to attend its upcoming World Congress in Berlin in May.

These two events illustrate the fact that the trade union landscape in much of the developing world now seems keen on putting the past behind us and welcoming China’s trade unions back into our “global family”.

This is the culmination of efforts going back several years, and the British TUC has played a prominent — indeed, enthusiastic — part in this process. I think that this is a problem for the trade union movement because the officially sanctioned, legal trade unions in China are not trade unions in the sense that we understand them in a country like the UK.

Historically, the ACFTU differed not one iota from, say, the “All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions” in the USSR. Indeed, it was set up based on the Soviet model.

And that model had nothing to do with work representation, collective bargaining, or class struggle. In the Soviet model, unions were organs of the Communist Party and the state, designed to enforce workplace discipline and provide some welfare benefits to workers.

I think few would deny that the Chinese unions fit that description perfectly, almost until a few years ago.

For that reason, for many decades the ACFTU was quite isolated in the international trade union movement. Like trade unions in Cuba, North Korea or Vietnam, it was seen as a “state labour front” — and not a union.

What has changed in the last few decades is that China has embraced the free market. And as a result, there is the sudden emergence of class struggle.

Strikes occur every day, all over the country, and they are often allowed to run their course — winning workers improved wages and working conditions.

The Communist Party seems to have decided that it is best to let workers let off steam this way, rather than attempting to suppress every strike and protest.

So strikes are tolerated — but it stops there. The regime does not tolerate, and cannot tolerate, the emergence of truly free and independent trade unions controlled by their members.

The formation of a nationwide Chinese version of “Solidarity” is a nightmare scenario for the ruling Party elite.

In most cases, the strikes taking place are local with very little nationwide coordination. The organisations set up by workers spontaneously tend to fade away fairly quickly.

In some cases, local officials of the ACFTU unions support the workers or even lead them. But a union as a whole remains firmly in the grasp of the Communist Party.

OFFICIAL
Its leader, Li Jianguo, is a member of the Politburo of the Party. His entire political career spanning some 40 years has been as a Party official. He was given the task of leading the ACFTU in early 2013.

Just to emphasize — Li rose up through the ranks of the Communist Party, not the unions. As a very senior Party leader, he was brought in to take charge of the ACFTU.

This is typical of the authoritarian, top-down style of Chinese politics — and trade unions.

Just before his elevation to the leadership of the Chinese unions, Li faced public accusations of favouritism. He was accused with promoting his nephew to a plum position.

The website of the ACFTU speaks a great deal about how the organisation protects workers.
From November 1983 the members of the National Union of Mineworkers were implementing an overtime ban in protest at threatened job losses and pit closures. Coal stocks were nowhere near as high as the Tories hoped for, if they were going to come after the miners.

MacGregor had met with Thatcher six months before the strike to discuss drawing the NUM into battle. With the overtime ban bitten, he announced accelerated closures and 20,000 job cuts. Scargill insisted that 70,000 were really planned. This would turn out to be an understatement! When the first closures of a handful of pits were announced, thousands of Yorkshire miners were already on strike. They insisted on solidarity.

The NUM didn’t blunder by calling the strike. The miners themselves insisted on striking, and without a national ballot. Their principle was that one set of miners shouldn’t sell out a minority facing job losses.

Some may say with hindsight that, with 61% showing in favour of a strike in opinion polls, it was a mistake not to call a ballot. But the flying pickets and appeals to solidarity had worked before, and the miners showed at a Special Delegate conference that they did not want a ballot. The Yorkshire miners (the biggest area) were to the left of their leaders!

Not just the Notts scabs should shoulder the blame for defeat. Leaders of unions and the Labour Party failed to lead and encourage the millions of trade union members to solidarity. Solidarity strike action could have won the strike.

The early chapters of this book take us through the history of Notts and the miners. In the 1926 General Strike, Notts miners struck for months before being starved back to work. A Labour MP, George Spencer, led an eventual breakaway company union which many see as the precursor of the breakaway UDM led by people like Roy Lynk.

The author focuses rightly on the fact (now proven by pamphlet. Solidarity books) that Thatcher and the Tories planned. This would turn out to be an underestimation!

The collusion with right wing businessmen, Tories, police and even secret services by right-wing leaders in the Notts area NUM is brought out in detail as are the historical reasons (higher wages, the fact that many Notts miners had moved from other areas after their pits had closed and constant reassurances that their pits were safe).

Unfortunately, there is little discussion of the rank and file NUM strike committee led by its secretary Paul Whetton, which was crucial to the resolve of the deservedly praised Notts strikers. However, there is mention of some of the finest examples of solidarity action; the railworkers who defied the anti-union laws and refused to move coal, or the miners’ support groups including the black communities, LGBTQ communities and others all over the UK and beyond.

The Tony press celebrated the “bravery” of scabs and the “violence” of pickets. What the miners needed was equally unequivocal support from trade union leaders and particularly Neil Kinnock. Kinnock claimed he was behind the NUM, but regularly said he condemned their violence.

One death that was hysterically seized upon was of a taxi driver ferrying a lone scab into a solidly striking South Wales pit. Yet little attention was drawn to the thousands of families terrorised in their own villages, thousands of pickets arrested on trumped up charges, hundreds injured and jailed, thousands killed, and three children killed scavenging for coal as the striking miners were left with little food and heating.

Striking Notts miners collecting in the centre of Nottingham that told me food and demos and money in tins were welcome but not enough, that I should throw myself into the battle being waged in the Labour Party to get the leadership to back the miners. That led to me meeting Socialist Organiser (forerunner of Solidarity and Workers’ Liberty), reading “Whetton’s Week” in the paper, going to political discussions in miners’ welfare, and selling the hugely popular Magnificent Seven pamphlet.

I saw Billy Bragg on his first appearance on Top of the Pops singing “Between the Wars” just after the end of the strike. I bought loads of copies to give to friends and relatives just for the B side, “Which side are you on?”, summing up that in such a battle as the miners’ strike you have to take sides. The other scabbing areas chose the right side.

Those that cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it!” reads a quote at the beginning of the book. This book is an important tool in that remembering.

• Look Back in Anger is published by Five Leaves, PO Box 8786, Nottingham NG1 9AW.
How Norway’s Labour helped Stalin against Trotsky

Passing the spotlight reviews Trotsky in Norway: Exile, 1935–1937 by Oddvar Høidal

When Leon Trotsky published his autobiography, My Life (1930) aged 50, he had already experienced three periods of exile.

The first, from 1903 to 1905, took place between two spells of underground work, two prison terms and two banishments, all in Tsarist Russia.

The second, between the two Russian revolutions (1905 and 1917) and including the First World War, was spent in Austria, the Balkans, France, Spain and then the US.

His third and final banishment began in 1929, following a year of internal exile in Central Asia, and commenced with his expulsion to Turkey. With some justice he could describe his situation as living on the planet without a visa. Yet Trotsky would spend a further decade outcast, in France (1933-35), Norway (1935-36) and finally Mexico (1937-40), where he was murdered by Stalin’s assassins.

On 18 June 1935, Nils Kaare Dahl, a Norwegian Trotskyist from the 1930s, but otherwise of underground work, two prison terms and two banishments of exile.

Høidal accepts that Tranmael articulated the government’s role of underground work, two prison terms and two banishments of exile.

Høidal does not believe pressure from the USSR was decisive. He brings to light the subtle interplay of Norwegian politics.

Heidal challenges a number of interpretations of Trotsky’s time in Norway. He asks who was responsible for Trotsky’s admission into Norway in 1935. Most accounts foreground the role of Walter Held (Heinz Epe), a German Trotskyist exile in Norway. However Heidal credits the Norwegian government, particularly with the launch of the Moscow trials.

Trotsky’s 18-months in Norway can be divided into four periods: first, from his arrival on 18 June 1935 to his hospitalisation on 19 September 1935; second, the month he spent in hospital and his further rehabilitation until the end of 1935; third, the first half of 1936, when he wrote The Revolution Betrayed, and finally the remainder of year, when harassed by Norwegian fascists, Norwegian Stalinists and the Russian government, Trotsky was first interned and then expelled.

Trotsky’s supporters described his four-month internment as a political issue in the summer of 1936. On 5 August, Trotsky’s residence in Weshall was burgled by fascists (who were also tapping his phone). Although the perpetrators were caught and put on trial, the “evidence” obtained in the burglary was used by the government to make the case against Trotsky.

Trotsky lived in Norway. He was allowed only an hour’s walk twice a day, and otherwise was totally cut off from the outside world, but otherwise was totally cut off from the outside world, and otherwise was totally cut off from the outside world.

Trotsky and friends in Norway

Trotsky or even in sympathy with Marxism, and this is reflected in some of his judgements and understandings of debates. However there is still much to learn from this well-researched history.

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Trotsky lived with socialist journalist Konrad Knudsen in London SE1 3DG

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Trotsky did not understand the importance of the Norwegian government in the post-war world. Heidal does not believe pressure from the USSR was decisive. He brings to light the subtle interplay of Norwegian politics.

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Trotsky’s supporters described his four-month internment at Sundby as a “monument of shame”. He enjoyed fewer rights than he had as a prisoner of the Tsar, with only his lawyers and Scheflo allowed to visit. Trotsky was allowed only an hour’s walk twice a day, and otherwise was totally isolated indoors, unable to answer the slanders against him in public. His supporters called this incarceration “the first Norwegian concentration camp”. In December 1936 he was escorted by the freighthouse and accompanied by a fascist police chief to ensure he arrived in Mexico.

Trotsky’s own verdict on his treatment in Norway was biting. He compared himself to Dr Stockman in Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People, ostracised and hounded for telling the truth. He wrote while on the way to Mexico: “When I look back today on this period of internment, I must say that never, anywhere, in the course of my life — and I have lived through many things — was I persecuted with as much miserable cynicism as I was by the Norwegian Socialist government. For four months these ministers, dripping with democratic hypocrisy, grabbed me in a stranglehold to prevent me from protesting the greatest crime history may ever know.”

In the book, we also learn the fate of the principal characters after Trotsky’s departure. This was made all the more tragic by the onset of the war, the German occupation and the Quisling regime. In 1937, Trotsky’s supporters formed an organisation and published the paper October, although the group only had eight members and did not survive the war. Scheflo’s ill-health continued, until he died of a heart attack in 1943 while on the run from the Gestapo. Another Norwegian sympathiser, Håkon Meyer, joined the NS during the war and afterwards was forced to labour. Konstad, the passport office head who investigated Trotsky, and Jonas Larsen, his assistant, were detained, deported to Mexico and cut off from Trotsky until his death in 1959. Walter Held was not so lucky — he too sought to escape the Nazis through Russia, but was caught and perished in a prison camp during the war. Trotsky’s lawyer in Norway, Puntervold, pursued him for money owed. Although Puntervold died the following year, Trotsky still had to settle with his estate. The Norwegian government pursued Trotsky for unpaid taxes, which he also had to settle.

The Norwegian saga was the prelude to Trotsky’s ultimate place of exile in Mexico. These last years have been described with verve by Bertrand Patenaude in Stalin’s Nemesis: The Exile and Murder of Leon Trotsky. We now know much more about the vicissitudes and traumas of Trotsky’s final years, which make his achievements all the more remarkable.

His defence and development of key Marxist ideas during that time remain irreplaceable in current politics.

New book rediscovers US socialist cartoons

A few bold strokes by an artist can convey an idea more vividly and fix it more firmly in the viewer’s mind than an editorial or an article would.

The cartoons collected in a new book depict US politics, 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 packaging.

Or send £10.60 to AWL, 20e Tower Workshops, Riley Road, London SE1 3DG

http://www.workersliberty.org/socialistcartoons

https://www.facebook.com/socialistcartoons
By Ollie Moore
Probation officers and criminal solicitors struck at the end of March, in a dual protest against the outsourcing of 70% of the probation service and a huge cut to the budget for legal aid.

Probation officers struck on 31 March, while solicitors struck for two days to 1 April.

Solicitors and barristers previously struck on 6 January and 7 March, massively disrupting the function of courts across the UK. The £215 million cuts to the legal aid budget will restrict barristers’ pay, and make it harder for anyone other than the rich to access top-quality legal representation or bring cases against powerful individuals or institutions. Criminal barristers reached a deal with the government on Thursday 27 March, and did not participate in the walkout.

The probation officers’ strike, organised by their union, the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), aims to stop what workers and their union see as the near-total privatisation of their service. Speaking to Solidarity about the proposals in 2013, one probation worker said: “The proposals are not evidence-based; there is not a single shred of evidence to suggest the service will be more effective with a privatised, payment-by-results system. The probation service has in fact been successful in reducing re-offending rates year on year, so there is simply no reasonable argument to privatise. It’s purely ideological.”

“In my office, many workers of all grades are no longer content with their position within the service, and many people are talking about leaving because they are sick of the constant threat of redundancy. I’ve spoken to plenty of workers over the last few years, and the same themes keep coming up: ‘We’re getting sold to Serco aren’t we? ‘I might just take redundancy and get another job somewhere else.’”

Ian Lawrence, NAPO general secretary, said: “The government plan to outsource 70% of the probation service is untried and untested. It is a dangerous social experiment that we believe will lead to a reduction in rehabilitation and fragment risk management, placing the public at risk. These reforms are ideologically driven and being pushed by a political timetable.”

Solicitor Matt Foot said: “This is the first time in history when solicitors, barristers and probation officers have taken joint action not to work the courts.

“All but the rich will suffer because of these cuts — which is why we are united and determined to stop [justice minister] Grayling.”

Workers fight halls closure

By Jonny West
Outsourced workers at the University of London are fighting the closure of the Garden Halls, a university halls of residence, which they say could lead to job cuts.

A petition campaign has attracted support from hundreds of students. The campaign is run by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) University of London branch, which is also integral to the “3 Cosas” campaign for sick pay, holidays, and pensions. IWGB is also fighting a recognition battle, with the management of both the outsourced companies and the university itself insisting that they will only speak to Unison, now a minority union amongst outsourced staff.

Workers’ Liberty members in the IWGB University of London branch help produce the Open Book bulletin, which provides a forum for discussing workplace experiences and union campaigns.

The next bulletin is due out on Wednesday 1 April. For more information, see iwbg.wordpress.com

Teachers strike

Teachers in England struck for one day on Wednesday 26 March, in an ongoing dispute with the government over pensions, pay, and workload.

The strike was strong across the country, shutting hundreds of schools. Over 10,000 strikers and supporters marched in London.

The Local Associations Network, a rank-and-file caucus in the National Union of Teachers, is pushing for the dispute to escalate beyond scattered one-day strikes.

Ritzy strike

Workers at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton, south London, have voted by an 85% majority to strike to win the London Living Wage.

Ritzy workers have waged a long-running battle for the pay increase, but Picturehouse Cinemas, the chain that runs the Ritzy, has so far remained intransigent, to the point of banning local publication Brixton Bugle from the cinema for running an article supporting the workers.

The workers are members of BECTU, which represents workers in theatres, cinemas, and the television industry.

For more, see facebook.com/ritzylivingw age

Local government pay

The GMB union will consult its 220,000 members in local government on a 1% pay offer from employers, with a recommendation to reject and move to industrial action. More next week.

Lambeth college strike

By Darren Bedford
Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Lambeth College in South London have voted by 85% to strike, in a fight over proposed changes to terms and conditions.

Union activists say the changes would increase staff workload, but reduce sick pay and holiday entitlement, leaving workers at Lambeth working longer hours than almost every other Further Education college in London. UCU regional official Una O’Brien said: “Lambeth College cannot expect to simply force through punitive changes to staff’s terms and conditions.”

The union has yet to name strike dates.

More car job cuts

By Darren Bedford
Car workers suffered another blow on 25 March, as Honda announced a plan to cut 360 permanent and 160 agency jobs from its Swindon plant.

The actual job losses suffered could be as high as 500, as businesses elsewhere in Honda’s supply chain are hit by the central cuts.

Unite described the job losses as “a devastating blow”, and “a wake-up call to the UK government”, but despite saying it was “determined” to save the jobs, the only concrete action proposed was an “appeal” to Vince Cable from Tony Murphy, the union’s national officer for car manufacturing, to “work with us to find ways of persuading Honda to think again on jobs and investment.”

Cosy chats with Vince and Tony are unlikely to make Honda think again about anything much. Industrial action, even at this late stage, might.

Honda’s announcement is the latest in a series of significant cuts to car manufacturing jobs in Britain, following the loss of 1,300 jobs at Ford plants in Dagenham and Southampton in 2012.

Although local unions organised demonstrations to object to the cuts, workers in the plants were not confident enough to take the kind of action that might have saved jobs — sit-down strikes and occupations.

The kind of confidence needed to take that action isn’t easy to build, but union leaders can help to build it by encouraging militant reps, stewards, and activists in factories and helping them agitate amongst their workmates, rather than restricting themselves to merely moaning the cuts and meekly appealing to Lib Dem ministers for help.

The local labour movement in Swindon can help by assisting reps and stewards at the plant and building a public, community campaign to demand that jobs are kept.
Putin: hands off Ukraine!

By Martin Thomas

Russia’s ruler Vladimir Putin has demanded that Ukraine adopt a federal constitution. The move is a gambit to gain Moscow more leverage in Ukraine.

Ukraine is diverse, but it is a distinct nation, with a right to independence from Russia; and, despite Russian claims, it does not divide neatly into two sectors. The west is poorer, heavily dependent on remittances from Ukrainians working abroad, and mostly Ukrainian-speaking; it was not part of the USSR until 1939.

In the middle, Kiev, the capital, and centre of the movement which ousted the corrupt pro-Russian president Yanukovych in February, is mostly Russian-speaking. Rural areas are more often Ukrainian-speaking.

The eastern edge is the site of most of Ukraine’s heavy industry and natural resources. It is more heavily Russian-speaking, and a significant minority are actually Russian. (Workers from elsewhere in the USSR moved to eastern Ukraine’s factories and miners during Stalinist industrialisation).

Whether this diversity is managed by federal arrangements or not should be Ukraine’s choice. Putin’s government has no rights in the matter.

Since February Putin has militarily occupied and annexed Crimea and massed troops on Ukraine’s eastern borders. As we go to press on 1 April, Russia is said to be reducing that military build-up.

Within Russia, itself theoretically a federal state, Putin has transferred the bulk of tax income to the centre, and abolished direct local elections for regional governors in favour of having them appointed from the centre.

On Saturday 29 March, representatives of Crimea’s indigenous people - the Crimean Tatars, deported en masse by Stalin in 1944 and allowed to return to their homeland only in 1989 - met and voted to seek “territorial autonomy” within Crimea. Their experience under Stalin and Brezhnev has made the Tatars fearful of Russian rule, and most of them boycotted the rigged 16 March referendum to join Crimea to Russia.

New presidential elections in Ukraine are scheduled for 25 May. The front-runner is Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch of slight social-democratic pretensions.

Russia: hands off Ukraine! Keep Russian troops out!

Western governments: cancel Ukraine’s debts!

The labour movement should back Ukraine’s left in its efforts to create “third pole” against both Russian imperialism and the Ukrainian oligarchs.

By Rhodri Evans

The official regulator for the energy industry, Ofgem, reported on 27 March that suppliers’ retail profits – from selling energy to households and businesses – had risen to £1.1 billion in 2012 from £233m in 2009. No austerity for the energy bosses!

It also found “a pattern of suppliers raising prices more rapidly and to a greater extent in response to an increase in costs than they reduce prices in response to a fall in costs”.

Ofgem has called for another official body, the CMA, to investigate the industry and report whether collusion and lack of competition is allowing the big energy companies to gain super-profits. First comes a consultation, closing on 23 May, before the investigation gets under way.

Knowing that the Ofgem report was coming, one big energy company, SSE, tried to cover itself by announcing on 26 March that it would freeze prices until January 2016. Since SSE increased its prices last September by 8.2%, it can well afford the freeze.

SSE’s move exposes the squawks of complaint made last autumn by energy bosses when Ed Miliband proposed a freeze. They said a price freeze would make the industry “unsustainable” and doom it to “economic ruin”.

But it also shows that energy bosses can afford a short price freeze and still pocket large profits.

Solidarity says that the entire energy industry should be taken under democratic public ownership, with workers in control in the workplace. Immediately, the profit principle can be abolished along with the complex market structure of Suppliers, Agents, Distributors and Generators.

That public and democratic control would also ease the way for energy generation to be de-carbonised and shifted to renewables and new-generation nuclear, in tandem with programmes to improve housing and public spaces.

Time to see off the bedroom tax!

By David Kirk

The bedroom tax has become a byword for all that is cruel, arbitrary and vindictive in the government’s assault on the poor.

The fight back has had some clear victories: exemptions for the severely disabled, carers and foster parents had been dropped by the time the policy was implemented. Since then some councils and housing associations have been forced to curtail or drop thousands of court cases.

The key fight, however, is to get councils and housing associations to adopt no-eviction policies. There have been some successes in this field but it requires the mobilisation of the labour movement in a sustained alliance with tenants.

In Scotland this kind of pressure eventually yielded a no-eviction pledge from the Scottish government.

One key area of struggle is the Labour Party. Labour’s leadership did oppose the bill, but then refused to say whether they would repeal it. Relentless pressure forced Miliband into a firm commitment to repeal if elected.

However even though the Labour Party opposes the tax, Labour-run local authorities continue to enforce the policy, with few exceptions.

Saturday 5 April is a national day of action against the bedroom tax. Marches and protests are planned in many cities. We should also use these as an opportunity to discuss the next steps in the struggle and how to pressure councils and housing associations into adopting defiant no-eviction, no-implementation policies.

A start can be made by asking local Labour councillors to sign the “Councillors Against The Cuts” statement.

Victory on the bedroom tax is a real prospect if our movement gets serious about the struggle. Such a victory could turn the tide in the war being waged against the working class. Let’s make sure this policy doesn’t see a second anniversary.

5 April protests: bit.ly/PeJRFP