New Era scandal highlights landlord rip-offs

Control rents!
Independent working-class representation in politics.

Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or

If you agree with us, please take some copies of Solidarity to sell —

A workers’ movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full

Maxim um left unity in action, and openness in debate.

Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have

have been reportedly killed

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

alties on both sides. 11

have been killed, 60,000 civilians.

The death toll in Kobane continues to rise with casual-

ities on both sides. 11

200,000 Syrians have been killed, 60,000 civilians.

The same David Coburn MEP described same sex

marriage proponents as "equality Nazis" — trying to

give Christianity a jolly good kicking ... it’s false bol-
locks, the lot of it.”

“It’s just for some queen who wants to dress up in a bridal frock and in a big moustache and dance up the

ase to the Village People.”

The same David Coburn MEP allegedly called Scott-

ish Tory leader Ruth Davidson a “fat lesbian.”

Monckton has rejected the demand for a further 150 Peshmerga

fighters will be joining the YPG forces in Kobane. Un-

dicated himself from Monck-

ton by asking: “How many

wanted a fag”? David Coburn MEP’s

Farage has not addressed

these comments, and

worked with Monckton until last year.

This, together with

Coburn’s vile remarks,

shows the true face of UKIP. UKIP is not for equality.

It is opportunistically

accepting of some LGBTQ

people but cannot repre-

sent us or our interests in

any real sense.
Stop landlord rip-offs: control rents!

By Colin Foster

The tenants’ campaign on the New Era estate in Hoxton, east London, has spotlighted the rise of a fight back by private tenants.

“When our estate was bought by new owners,” say the New Era tenants, “we were given rent rises of 10% and told to expect greater rises next year, as the new owners wanted rents to be at ‘market levels’. In Hoxton this means over £200 a week.

Current rents are about £160 a week, so most tenants face being forced out of their homes (bit.ly/n-era).

Three trends have come together:

Firstly: between 2008-9 and 2012-3, households privately renting increased from 14% to 18% of the total, and outstripped social renting.

The number of owner-occupiers, after soaring in the Thatcher era, has decreased since 2008. Social housing has been cut back by government-imposed “right-to-buy” for tenants and by an almost total block on councils building new dwellings. The Scottish Parliament has increased the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) for tenants on housing benefit. Social housing should be re-expanded by authorising councils to take over empty or underused properties, and to build new dwellings. In the meantime, the London Renters’ campaign, an alliance of private tenants’ groups in several areas, demands: Action to bring down rents and keep them under control.

Secondly: most private tenants are subject to rent rises based on a “guaranteed security of tenure and fair rent rises”. In the late 1950s tenants won a Rent Act which gave some security of tenure and “fair rents” set as to allow rises based solely on the market. The 1965 law was undone by Housing Acts of the Thatcher government in 1980 and 1988. The impact then was limited, since relatively few people rented privately. Now they have their full impact.

Thirdly: since October 2011, the government has limited the Local Housing Allowance (LHA), the maximum rent level which can be covered by housing benefit, to a level calculated so that 70% of rents in the area are higher and 30% lower. Since April 2013, not even that 30% level has been allowed. LHAS will increase only in line with the Consumer Price Index.

According to government figures, rents have been rising, but only modestly — by 8.5%, on average, between January 2005 and May 2013. But rents for new private tenancies have risen much faster than that.

In the three months to October 2014, average rents for new tenancies were 7.8% higher than the same period last year (£906 per month in 2014 vs. £840). The average rent for new tenancies in London was £1,411: this when real wages have been squeezed longer and more than ever previously recorded.

Tenants’ woes are increased by big charges made by letting agents, and by some agents refusing to deal with tenants on housing benefit.

Social housing should be re-expanded by authorising councils to take over empty or underused properties, and to build new dwellings. In the meantime, the London Renters’ campaign, an alliance of private tenants’ groups in several areas, demands:

• Action to bring down rents and keep them under control.
• Longer secure tenancies.
• An end to fees, and proper regulation of letting agents.
• No discrimination against housing benefit claimants.

The writer Danny Dorling repeats the call for rent controls, and also proposes:

• Extending the current council tax bands up to band “Z” with a view to transforming the tax into a fairer national land and property tax.
• Second homes, holiday homes and empty commercial property to be included into a fairer property tax system.

• Squatting and other acts done to seek shelter should again be a civil, not a criminal offence.

Limited tax powers for Scotland

By Dale Street

The cross-party Smith Commission on further Scottish devolution — set up to draw the “No” vote in September’s Scottish referendum — published its report last week.

The Scottish Parliament will have the power to set its own income tax rates and the income levels at which these are paid. Around half of VAT receipts will be allocated to the Scottish government. Control over Air Passenger Duty will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

Although the Smith Commission proposes that the Barnett Formula (used to calculate the block grant paid to Scotland by the UK government) will continue, it also proposes “an updated fiscal framework.”

In effect, this means that the greater the income raised by the Scottish Parliament (e.g. from income tax, or from VAT receipts), the less it will receive as a block grant.

The Scottish Parliament will have increased borrowing powers and control over local and Scottish elections (including extending the franchise to 16/17-year-olds), albeit only if approved by a two-thirds majority in Holyrood.

The National Minimum Wage and all elements of state pensions remain under Westminster control, as too does Universal Credit (UC). But the Scottish Parliament will have powers to: tinker around the edges of UC; control some non-UC benefits; and create new benefits in areas of devolved responsibility.

For supporters of independence, the Commission’s proposals are adequate. For others, the independence the Commission’s proposals are “a promise of independence.”

It is certainly true that some of the central demands raised in trade union sub-committees to the Commission have been ignored: employment law (including anti-union laws); powers to take industries into public ownership; all welfare benefits (including UC); Employment Tribunals (including fees); and the HSE.

Sunday’s Scottish press carried reports that an earlier draft of the Commission’s report included proposals for devolution of effectively the entire welfare benefits system to Scotland, including UC. The Commission’s proposals for rent controls, and also proposes:

• Extend the current council tax bands up to band “Z” with a view to transforming the tax into a fairer national land and property tax.
• Second homes, holiday homes and empty commercial property to be included into a fairer property tax system.

Dutch anti-racists ask for help

Ninety demonstrators were arrested in Gouda, in the Netherlands, on 15 November, when they peacefully protested against a “Black Pete” show.

The Netherlands celebrates a Sinterklaas (Santa Claus) day on 5 December, and since the middle of the 19th century the figure dressed up as Santa Claus is often accompanied by another, “Black Pete”, who is “blackened up” to represent a Santa Claus’s servant or slave.

Campaigners have leafleted and protested, saying that “White people painting their faces black and behaving according to colonial stereotypes of ‘niggers’ is considered and seen as racism almost everywhere.”

They are asking for support from other countries on 5 December.

bit.ly/s-klaas

Occupy needs politics

By Andy Forse

After being evicted by the police from their nine day occupation of Parliament Square in October, a new movement called “Occupy Democracy” attempted to reclaim the Square on Friday 21 November.

Police repressed the direct action. The former deputy chairman of the Liberal Democrats, Donnachadh McCarthy, was arrested. The demonstration continued nearby, with speakers including NHE campaigner Lucy Reynolds and the Green Party’s Natalie Bennett and a total around 200 people participating. One protestor chained himself to the railings of parliament.

The movement is attempting to challenge “corporate influence” and the “democratic deficit”. Their core messages and provisional demands are vague and diffuse, essentially a slate of social-democratic reforms with no mention of capitalism.

The movement has some new participants as well as original Occupy people. A couple of Socialist Worker placards were visible. It seems like there’s a visible simmering of activity, with activists employing a persevering strategy that entails inevitable confrontation with the police. Occupy say they will return to Parliament Square on 20/21 December “to take back the square”.

Since its inception 3 years ago, Occupy has dispersed into a network of autonomous groups, which includes an economics working-group, an environmental working group, and a free, well-produced quarterly publication. The Occupied Times of London. The latest issue includes headlines such as “Boycott Israel” and “From the River to the Sea”, and articles on climate disaster, more general reportage on global capitalism. With its populist slant, it is noticeably lacking in critical discussion or debate about direction on these issues.

There is space for interventions to be made concerning the centrality of class-struggle politics to achieving their desired aims.
SWP: more than abuses of power

Letters

Martin Thomas objects to the use of the term “rape apologism” to describe the SWP’s behaviour over complaints of rape and sexual harassment, which eventually led to the group’s implosion (Solidarity 340).

He says the term is inaccurate. The SWP’s real crimes were various abuses of power by the leadership and the party machine.

I accept that the accusation needs further explanation and the sentence in which I made the accusation was sloppily written, but I think the substance of the accusation makes sense.

I take rape apologism to be a spectrum of ideas and practices which relate to the structural and ideological marginalisation of the importance of sexual abuse in society especially against women. So it might not be blatant statements like “she asked for it”. Indeed very few people would be that blatant.

Martin might reasonably object to the tenor of the language in the term “rape apologism”, but the phenomena exists and takes a number of forms.

In the SWP marginalisation of the importance of rape and abuse were surely bound up with abuses of power, manipulative and often brutal. But the outcome was the covering up of complaints of sexual abuse, there is an problem right there.

Granted, the starting point for the SWP was to save one of the leading members who had highly useful connections to the great and the good in the union movement. And they would have made similar attempt to brush aside complaints which were used as a weapon against him, bullying, stealing from his comrades, and so on. Similar, but not the same.

The point is that once most of the SWP’s leadership decided they really wanted to keep Martin Smith in their organisation, they very simply invested the possibility that it was guilty. That led to behaviour from themselves, and which they encouraged in others, that really can be described as rape apologism.

The evidence for this comes from people who observed it first hand. While this is not conclusive proof, I am convinced by many of these observations.

Dave Renton: “Among the SWP majority, a belief is prevalent that nobody can ever really ‘know’ what happens in the privacy of a relationship between a man and a woman. It follows that in the context of multiple allegations of sexual abuse, the party is the only thing that counts.”

Comrade X (who made a complaint of sexual harassment): “Obviously there are instances where people may come forward lightly in cases like these. We should start from that viewpoint of saying, ‘If it is guilty then it’s right to investigate claims. However in our tradition we argue that women do not come forward lightly in cases like these. We should start from that viewpoint and attempt to substantiate the woman’s complaint. I don’t believe that the Dispute’s Committee in my case shows this to have happened.”

Colin Foster’s letter “Hyping it up” (Solidarity 345), in response to my initial letter, is peculiar, evasive and defensive.

The backdrop to this is an ongoing discussion in Workers’ Liberty about the emphasis of our approach towards Labour in the general election. Colin was amongst the majority who supported a Socialist Campaign for Labour Victory. I was in a minority (albeit a significant one) which supported a Campaign for a Workers’ Government. The minority also argued for beginning to seriously re-visit standing candidates against Labour.

Colin starts by correctly pointing out that Miliband is partially responsible for the rise of UKIP, which Lansman seemed to deny. But even here Colin feels it necessary to defend Lansman by arguing “He probably meant that no other halfway-like leader ... could have stopped a rise of UKIP, wither, which is true.”

I fear that Lansman’s “article is a guest article and doesn’t reflect our line”, but with the corrective outlined above he defends the article. The fact that it was a guest article doesn’t really deal with my criticism, that the article does not inform us of anything most Solidarity readers would not be aware of already (by just following the news), it gives us no guide to action, it doesn’t present a view that would not be widely held by anyone to the left of the Blairites, nor does it even give us a position clearly to differentiate ourselves from.

So what was the purpose of running the article? It wasn’t as though we had commissioned it and that Lansman would have been offended had we not run it. This was my point when I argued “… what do we propose that activists should do about it? Move motions of support in their labour movement bodies extolling the virtues of the current leadership?” I thought that was self-evidently ridiculous. That Colin takes it at face value is telling of a rightward drift within the organisation.

Colin says I “censure the article for including its anti-cut call only in the headline”. In fact all I said was that “it should be noted…” which is actually just pointing out the truth. He then goes on to slightly paranoid speculation of whether I thought the Solidarity office had added the headline to “smarten the article up.”

I had no idea who had written the headline when I wrote my letter. It was simply the case that the article did not mention anti-cuts or indeed anything else political other than Miliband’s leadership, no matter who wrote the headline.

I don’t recognise the criticism that I am hyping up how bad the Labour Party is at present. I really don’t need to do that when Miliband is on the television saying that Cameron can’t be trusted to keep immigration numbers down, or my local Labour council is pursuing the academisation of secondary schools, just because it agrees with it not under pressure from...
Mobilise against council cuts!

The Local Government Association, which represents local councils, warned on 19 November that “services will buckle under the strain of further cuts”.

Back in July it had already warned: “The funding gap is growing at an average of £2.1 billion a year, adding up to £12.4 billion by the end of [this] decade”.

The National Audit Office has estimated (1 November) a 37% real-terms reduction in government funding to local authorities between 2010-11 to 2015-16.

Local authorities with the highest levels of disadvantage are facing the greatest cuts.

Councils have been projecting drastic cuts for 2015-6, partly in the hope of scaring the government, and partly in the spirit of softening up communities and local government workers’ unions to accept similar but maybe marginally-smaller cuts.

Manchester City Council plans to cut £60 million. It says it will axe school crossing patrols, cut nearly £2 million from youth services, end free swims for children and the elderly, stop all community grants, close nine homeless hostels, and end support for respite for carers.

600 jobs could go. Newcastle’s social care and safeguarding are safe. The council proposes to cut £10 million cuts from these services.

Birmingham plans £200 million cuts for the next year alone, chopping 6,000 jobs in the next three years on top of 7,000 already lost since 2010.

Newcastle, which has received much coverage about its cuts after the council leader threatened to cut all arts funding and 50% of the libraries in 2013, plans to cut another £90 million in 2015-8, after cutting £37 million in 2013-4 and £38 million in 2014-5.

It has already cut all play and youth services, closed and outsourced pools and leisure services, and cut children’s centres and family services by nearly £5 million.

They are right to complain about the excessive central government control over local budgets, enforced since the Thatcher government and increased by the current administration’s measures to make it almost impossible for councils to raise council tax.

But we need a labour-movement campaign to get resources by taxing the rich and expropriating the banks, not a joint Labour-Tory plea for adjustments.

Although union leaders have accepted another year of less-than-inflation pay raises, as well as cuts of hundreds of thousands of council jobs, things could be changing in the biggest local government workers’ union, Unison.

Unison branches from some of the councils facing the most significant cuts (including Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Nottingham) have won support from 30% of the union’s branches for a special conference to debate strategy over this year’s pay dispute.

The fight against cuts and the fight for decent pay are inextricably linked. The unions fail to defend local services for the same reason that they fail to deliver a strategy to win decent pay.

Unions and Labour Parties should demand that Labour councils refuse to make cuts. Unions should support their members who are local councillors in making a stand against cuts.

And if Labour councils won’t fight the Tories, then unions and communities must fight the Labour councils.

Solidarity with migrants against Tory and Labour attacks

Last month Labour said they want to increase the time new EU migrants have to wait before claiming in-work benefits — to two years. Not to be outdone in a disgusting competition to be toughest on migrants, Cameron announced he wanted EU migrants to work for four years before being eligible to claim.

Both parties want to restrict child tax credits and child benefit. The Tories also want to restrict access to social housing.

The say they will deport all EU migrants who do not find a job within six months and introduce stronger laws to allow EU migrant workers less, she advocated attacking the lowest paid.

Cuts in tax credits hit the lowest-waged. Thinktank Open Europe calculates that if tax credits are withdrawn a single earner on the minimum wage will see their income drop by £100 a week, taking their pay close to the Spanish minimum wage. The policies of both Labour and the Tories are designed to reduce the disparity between the take-home pay EU migrants home get in the UK and in their country of origin.

Ironically Labour’s Rachel Reeves, making the policy announcement, said “the European single market should not be about a race to the bottom on working conditions”. But instead of arguing for the levelling up of conditions across the EU, and for regulations to prevent British employers paying migrant workers less, she advocated attacking the lowest paid and most vulnerable.

Labour’s Yvette Cooper said: “In terms of the migration that happens every single year, I think there is a problem with low skilled migration because of the scale and pace of it. ” Yet recent research by University College London shows that 60% of migrants from western and southern Europe, and 25% of those from eastern Europe have a university degree, compared to 24% of the UK-born workforce.

Attacking the poorest does nothing to prevent the race-to-the-bottom on wages and working conditions. Level up across Europe!
Proletarians of all countries, unite!

Rosa Luxemburg

Into the disillusioned atmosphere of pale daylight there rings a different chorus; the hoarse creak of the hawks and hyenas of the battlefield.

Ten thousand tents, guaranteed according to specifications, 100,000 kilos of bacon, cocoa powder, coffee substitute, cash on immediate delivery. Shrapnel, drills, ammunition bags, marriage bureaus for war widows, leather belts, war orders — only serious propositions considered.

And the cannon fodder that was loaded upon the trains in August and September is rotting on the battlefields of Belgium and the Vosges, while profits are springing, like weeds, from the fields of the dead.

Business is flourishing upon the ruins. Cities are turned into shambles, whole countries into deserts, villages into cemeteries, whole nations into beggars, churches into stables; popular rights, treaties, alliances, the holiest words and the highest authorities have been torn into scraps; every sovereign by the grace of God is called a fool, an unfaithful wretch, by his cousin on the other side; every diplomat calls his colleague in the enemy’s country a desperate criminal; each government looks upon the other as the evil genius of its people, worthy only of the contempt of the world.

Revolts erupt in Venetia, in Lisbon, in Moscow, in Singapore, in Russia, misery and desperation everywhere. Shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands.

Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics — as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devouring culture and humanity — so it appears in all its hideous nakedness.

Capitalist politicians, in whose eyes the rulers of the people and the ruling classes are the nation, cannot honestly speak of the “right of national self-determination” in connection with such colonial empires. To the socialist, no nation is free whose national existence is based upon the enslavement of another people, for to him colonial peoples, too, are human beings, and, as such, parts of the national state.

International Socialism recognised the right of free independent nations, with equal rights. But socialism alone can create such nations, can bring self-determination of their peoples. This slogan of socialism is like all its others, not an apology for existing conditions, but a guide-post, a spur for the revolutionary, regenerative, active policy of the proletariat.

So long as capitalist states exist, i.e., so long as imperialistic world policies determine and regulate the inner and the outer life of a nation, there can be no “national self-determination” either in war or in peace.

In the present imperialistic milieu there can be no wars of national self-defence. Every socialist policy that depends upon this determining historic milieu that is willing to fix its policies in the world whirlpool from the point of view of a single nation is built upon a foundation of sand...

Historic development moves in contradictions, and for every necessity puts its opposite into the world as well. The capitalist state is double a historic necessity, but so also is the revolt of the working class against it. Capital is a historic necessity, but in the same measure is its grave-digger, the socialist proletariat. The world rule of imperialism is a historic necessity, but likewise its overthrow by the proletarian international.

Side by side the two historic necessities exist, in constant conflict with each other. And ours is the necessity of socialism. Our necessity receives its justification with the moment when the capitalist class ceases to be the bearer of historic progress, when it becomes a hindrance, a danger, to the future development of society. That capitalism has reached this stage the present world war has revealed...

This madness will not stop, and this bloody nightmare of hell will not cease until the workers of Germany, of France, of Russia and of England will wake up out of their drunken sleep; will clasp each other’s arms in brotherhood and will down the bestial chorus of war agitators and the hoarse cry of capitalist hyenas with the mighty cry of labor, “Proletarians of all countries, unite!”

*From the Jurius Pamphlet (1915)*


Those who

By Jim Jepps

Every time I see the establishment line up to commemorate the “glorious” dead of the First World War I can’t help but think of Siegfried Sassoon’s words: “The Great Ones of the Earth approve, with smiles and bland salutes, the rage and monstrous tyranny that they have brought to birth.”

The official celebrations of the Great War treat the conflict like a great patriotic tragedy. However even at the time hundreds of thousands refused to go along with the war. Risking their lives, liberty and the hatred of others they raised their voices against the killing, and those voices only grew louder as the war went on.

In Britain conscription was introduced in 1916 and more than 20,000 men refused the call, declaring themselves Conscientious Objectors (or COs). Many organisations helped to oppose the war including those on the left and Quakers. This being Britain each CO had to fill in a form and tick a box as to whether they were objecting on religious or political grounds. Around half ticked religion and the other half politics — although in truth for many it was a bit of both.

Those who applied for CO status weren’t always granted it. First they had to convince the magistrate at a specially convened court, who was rarely sympathetic. Anarchists began organising what we’d call “solidarity actions” today, filling the court with supporters and then creating mayhem when proceedings began. Socialists would sing red or anti-war songs.

It’s sometimes argued that Britain was particularly lenient in not shooting those who refused to fight. This needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. One of my relatives on my father’s side, Arthur Bowyer, was a conscientious objector and sentenced to hard labour, and was then sent to France to work as a grave digger at the front.

Physically broken and suffering from shell shock, he died in his twenties, for the crime of refusing to pick up a gun for his country. We were only lenient if it is kinder to break something; it was far from cowards for refusing to take up arms.

It was far from an easy course of action, COs faced jail, social exclusion, violence and vile treatment.

They had no idea what might happen to them and the threat of execution (and even fake firing squads) was used to intimidate COs in an attempt to crack their resolve — which must have broken some

My grandmother remembered having bricks thrown through her windows as a child during the war, and COs suffered violence and scorn from prison guards and other soldiers alike, aside from the gruelling duties of hard labour, stretching-bearing or the degrading conditions of prison.

Some COs, nick named Absolutists, refused all orders, up to and including wearing the uniform. George Dutch recalled his experience; “They stripped me of my own clothing and put the uniform down beside me and said ‘Now you’ve got to put it on’, I said ‘Well, I will not put it on’. ‘Alright, you’ve got to sit there’. ”

I sat there for a day or two and the whole camp was interested. Everybody knew what was going on. Soldiers used to come and say ‘Go on, stick it boy, stick it if it kills you’. The major was very much disliked and I can understand that. I can see what type of person he was. He must have noticed it, because after a day or two suddenly my tent was taken up and taken right up on top of the cliff overlooking the sea. This was in November and it was pretty cold, misty weather.

And I was taken up there and my uniform put beside me again by the tent pole, and just to make things worse than ever they rolled the tent walls up so that the wind came right into the tent, all round, and I could sit there and freeze.
no refused to fight

Which I did. And the orders were that no one was to come near me until I dressed and came down.

“Well, I didn’t dress. I didn’t go down and I stayed there and I’m not quite sure how long it was, but I think it must have been at least ten days — and nights — in just my singlet and pants and socks. Just sitting like that in the tent and before I’d been there many hours I was frozen right through with exposure.

“Then suddenly a whole group of them turned up. The medical officer, the doctor, and the NCOs that had put me up there and rolled the tent walls up. The doctor was very angry. So he said to his men, ‘Get him down to the tent, down to the medical tent.’”

One leading anti-war organiser, Fenner Brockway, while imprisoned in Walton Prison, Liverpool, began the first illicit anti-war newspaper in prison, The Walton Leader.

Carefully written on toilet paper it was distributed cell to cell, man to man. When it was eventually discovered and he was punished, the jail erupted in a ten day prison strike until he was transferred to Lincoln jail (and solitary-confinement for around the next two years).

Brockway later became a recruiter for volunteers to fight in Spain through the ILP and wrote a recommendation letter for George Orwell when he set off to Barcelona.

With most of its male activists arrested, the No Conscription Fellowship continued its activities run almost entirely by courageous women. Those women who resisted the war are often written out of history. Of course, because they were not subject to conscription, they had fewer opportunities to get arrested but they were part of and led the movement none the less.

During the war Sylvia Pankhurst was sent to jail for five months (not for the first time), on this occasion for sedition. Editions of her paper were suppressed for calling on soldiers not to fight.

She described Labour politicians, who had opposed the war before it started and then voted for war credits once it had begun like this: “Some Socialists tell us that the floor of the House of Commons is a splendid platform for propaganda; but the trouble is that when they get into the House, their courage seems to evaporate like a child’s soap bubble. We have heard of Labour Members of Parliament being ready to do and say all sorts of heroic things, and to get themselves put out of the House, to arrest the world’s attention on some appropriate occasion. That is not much of course, as compared with running the risk of death in the horrible trenches or being incarcerated for years in prison.”

It wasn’t just small groups of activists that opposed the war. While we shouldn’t pretend there was any shortage of patriotic pro-war fervour, we know that a large minority were downright opposed. This has some reflection in the music hall, despite the fact that it was difficult to legally voice outright opposition.

One popular song, first written for the US music hall, became an international anti-war anthem. It’s not difficult to see why when we look at the lyrics of “I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier”:

“I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier/ I brought him up to be my pride and joy/ Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder/ To shoot some other mother’s darling boy/ Let mothers arbitrate their future problems/ It’s time to lay the sword and gun away/ There’d be no war today/ If mothers all would say/ ‘I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier’.”

The famous football match is a wonderful image, but it’s also the officially sanctioned ceasefire where soldiers still, literally, played by the rules. Far less famous are the unofficial ceasefires where whole stretches of the trenches refused to fight, or would simply agree to fire to miss, or only throw bombs at allocated times of the day.

The General Staff were firing off frustrated orders and memos to each other trying to solve the problem of an army that refused to fight, or seemed to be on positively friendly terms with those in the opposite trenches. In the end whole aspects of military strategy was designed in order to ensure soldiers would have no option but to kill the enemy.

In Mark Thompson’s brilliant The White War, which details the Italian / Austrian front, he describes how even officers more than once ordered a ceasefire simply to stop the killing.

“One occasion, the Austrian machine gunners were so effective that the second and third waves of Italian infantry could hardly clamber over the corpses of their comrades. An Austrian Captain shouted to his gunners, “What do you want, to kill them all? Let them be.”

The Austrians stopped firing and called out; “Stop, go back! We won’t shoot any more. Do you want everyone to die?”

Other more individualistic solutions included shooting the officer who was responsible for ordering a charge, deserting or simply wandering across no man’s land and giving yourself up to the enemy, knowing that there was no war in the prison camps.

The Conscientious Objectors of the First World War were courageous and principled. Whether motivated by religion, political principle, or a simple sense of common humanity, they were prepared to suffer the most terrible consequences in refusing to take part in a bloodbath that left millions dead across Europe.

They were also the tip of the iceberg of many tens of thousands of others who refused to fight in other, subtler ways. We’ll never know the truth about the mutinies that did take place in the British Army and Navy, but it’s clear that those who wanted no part of someone else’s war were far from alone.
Irish workers and the First World War

By Sean Matganna

“The trenches in France are healthier than the slums of Dublin!”

British army recruiting poster, 1916

The big, framed, multi-coloured certificate on our wall in Ennis, in the west of Ireland, puzzled me for a long time when I was very small.

To the left of the fireplace, near the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (in which Jesus Christ displayed his wounded, thorn-bound, bleeding heart outside his shirt), it was decorated at the top by a semi-circle of little flags of different sorts. The inscription was what I could not make sense of. It testified that John O’Mahony “had given his life” in July 1916 “to defend the liberty of his country”.

It was not my uncle’s name — my own name, too, in English, in memory of him — that confused me, but the reference to “his country”. Which country? John was in the English army. England was not his country, or mine; and England’s army was not the army of Ireland, his country.

I could not identify the Empire flags on the certificate, but I knew the Irish tricolour, and that was not there.

At first I was just puzzled; later, as I learned official 26 Counties history at school, I became vaguely ashamed, even angry. My uncle had died “defending his country” just a few weeks after the English army burned the centre of Dublin and killed 15 of their captured prisoners of war. These were the heroes who, with the earlier Republicans and the Irish saints and missionaries of ancient times and of our own time, were held up to us as embodying the highest ideals of Catholic Ireland.

I was uneasy, but pitting too. I knew John’s face. On the staircase there was a big framed old-fashioned sepia picture of a couple posing in a photographer's studio. The man, though he had a broad mustache and was in uniform, looked a bit like my father. The woman was bareheaded, in a long-skirted light-bibed dress, and looking people in the streets, both of them looked out at you boldly, seemingly afraid of nothing.

It was a wedding picture. John and Bid were married, then John’s leave was up, and he was gone, for good. I knew Bid. The handsome, bold-eyed woman in the photo was a tall, strong-bodied, gaunt-faced woman, one of the few women in the town who didn’t dress up in a coat but in the old-fash ioned long black tasseled shawl.

She never remarried. She had had a husband for one week.

PRESS-GANG

As I got older, I could make more sense of my father’s stories. The high-spirited John got drunk one evening, broke some windows, in a fight perhaps (I can’t remember), and the magistrate press-ganged him into the army.

But the magistrates and the others who wielded the pressures of the established order to herd men into the Army did not press-gang the hundreds of thousands of Irish men who joined up.

Sometimes it was “economic conscription”. In places like Ennis, a market town with little industry, the town poor eked out a living as best they could, hiring out as drovers at fairs, doing building work, cutting firewood in the woods outside the town and hawking it, cutting hazel saplings (“scoilops”) and selling bundles (“barths”) of them for use in thatching houses.

John’s brother, Bob, joined the British Army too. He was carrying an enormous bundle of scoilops from the woods on his back down miles of country road into the town one day, and having a back-breaking time of it as always. He stopped to rest against a wall, and there and then decided that the army was “better than this”. He survived, shell-shocked.

Another brother, Patrick, followed after them, and went through the war unscathed, only to be crippled by a hand grenade when fighting, probably for mercenary reasons, on the wrong side, the government side, in the Irish civil war of 1922-3.

Another force, the force of family tradition, also pulled them and, I guess, many others towards the British Army. Three of their uncles, and namesakes, John, Bob, Patsy, had been professional soldiers. Two of them, I think, went to India. From
How China’s economic wobbles hit workers

At the end of November, two Chinese government researchers published an estimate that over the past five years US$6,800 billion of investment in China has been wasted on bridges to nowhere and homes and offices with no one in them.

The estimate is disputed, but few doubt that huge excess capacity has been built. The Chinese government is trying to slow down the investment surge gently, and producer prices in China have been deflating since mid-2011.

The Chinese economy has a big build-up of debt, including for those contracts that are currently unused and maybe likely to be unused for some time. Some economists think that this accumulation of debt poses the risk of an economic crisis in China.

What would a crisis — or even a government-planned slowdown — mean for the greatly-expanded Chinese working class?

Anita Chan, a researcher into Chinese labour conditions and author of China’s Workers Under Assault: Exploitation and Abuse in a Globalizing Economy (2001), spoke to Martin Thomas.

AC: The construction sector has been booming for 20 years. Look at the highways, look at the express trains — they have all been constructed in the last ten years. Look at the new commercial and residential buildings over the last 30 years. China has been a leading builder for a long time.

In 2008, as part of the “stimulus plan”, China invested a lot of money. To offset the economic crisis, money was allocated to lower-level state and regional governments. These lower-level government authorities just keep on building! The construction sector is staffed by male migrant workers. They come in groups from the villages, they do construction projects, then they go back. They are being terribly exploited. Occupational health and safety is almost non-existent.

The problem has been that the government has not been able to pay workers owed a lot of back pay. They would regularly have protests about back pay in the couple of months before Chinese new year because they are often paid at the end of the year. There were many cases of construction workers climbing to high places and protested by threatening to commit suicide.

The government responded to this by cracking down on non-payment. They didn’t want the bad publicity. The situation has improved moderately in this respect because of government intervention.

MT: We don’t see many reports of strikes in construction. Why is that?

AC: Construction workers are very mobile. They are usually peasants coming out in gangs headed by a relative or friend. Even if they stop working, they can only go home to their village. They can't go on strike in a regular, on a construction site. Research on strikes in China tends to focus on south China. For one, that’s because lots of the researchers are based in Guangzhou, close to Guangdong. Guangdong province also has the highest concentration of foreign-run factories and supplier factories for multi-national companies. The Asian foreign-funded sector tends to be the most exploitative. You get this phenomenon in Vietnam too, in the supplier factories in Ho Chi Minh City.

Labour unrest is disproportionately concentrated in the supplier factories for multinationals. Researchers cannot keep up with the number of incidents and statistics for this sector. Workers on one or two production lines can go on strike for a couple of days. Is that a strike? Local governments do not recognize it as a strike. Local governments do not recognize it as a strike; they have some figures, they are not reliable since they may be falsified. Nonetheless, they go home. To the government, that is not a big issue.

In the past 15 years, the Chinese government has started to take better care of the countryside. They have instituted a series of reforms. Since the mid-2000s, there have been no tuition fees, no agricultural tax, and social insurance and medical insurance — on a low level, to be sure — have been offered to rural people. By rural standards, this is good. The situation in the countryside has improved.

For some peasants, going to look for work isn’t always the best option. They weigh the pros and cons to see whether they can really make money by joining a construction gang. Rural poverty is less visible and not as desperate as urban poverty.

MT: Some reports indicate that construction workers are low-paid compared to factory workers.

AC: If the wages are really paid, and not owed, as is common with subcontractors, then the wages are not terribly low in comparison. For day work, the construction workers make more than many factory hands.

It is hard work. But it is seasonal. Building workers are quite used to that. They get tired, they go home to their village for half a year take a rest and then they come out again.

AGENCY WORKERS

MT: In recent years, there has been a big rise in the number of agency workers, to something like 60 million. Where are they found? What are their conditions? If there is a crisis or a planned economic slowdown, are they likely to be the first in line to lose their jobs and suffer?

AC: I would say yes, especially in the state sector. They hire a lot of agency workers. So you have core workers, and then more-flexible agency workers. These days, it is like in the USA.

In China, there is a tradition about providing for the workers, a legacy from the previous era. Politically, things were different. For day work, the construction workers make more than many factory hands.

It is hard work. But it is seasonal. Building workers are quite used to that. They get tired, they go home to their village for half a year take a rest and then they come out again.

MT: Are agency workers used to break strikes?

AC: Not that I have heard of. Strikes in China are not like strikes in Australia or England. It is very spontaneous. 10% or 20% or 50% of the workers go on strike but the others don’t want to. There is no such thing as a picket line or collective bargaining. There are no rules about picketing or whether a strike is protected or not protected. Legally, strikes are not illegal. It is not mentioned in the labour law. A worker cannot be charged for going on strike. If strikers are arrested, it is for other reasons, like obstructing the street or instigating trouble.

But they are universal excuses in all countries to suppress strikes. You have a strike, after a while everyone goes back to work, they fire the leaders if they can find them, and that’s the end.

The way that factories used to hire in Guangdong was to stick up a poster at the main gate, and people would come every day. That’s still how they are able to recruit at Foxconn.

MT: So they wouldn’t need to deploy agency workers — they could just hire replacement workers directly. Construction workers in the cities have no status under the household registration system. What about agency workers?

AC: Agency workers can be locals. It depends on the place.

MT: You have researched Wal-Mart’s operations in China. How have things changed in recent years with that?

AC: Things have got worse. Wal-Mart stores have over-expanded. In some cities, some stores have never really made money in recent years. Wal-Mart are closing stores, and are trying not to pay compensation. There have been some issues over that.

Wal-Mart workers just don’t have overtime. Not that over-time ever existed when wages are very low, and you don’t have overtime, you cannot make a living. Overtime rates in China are quite high — 100% more than the normal wage for weekends, and three times more for holidays.

There are a lot of part-time workers, who cannot enjoy the same benefits. Wal-Mart will make you work up to a certain threshold of hours, but not beyond, so that you are not considered full-time and you are exempted from benefits.

Wal-Mart saves money by not having overtime, and by having a lot of part-time workers. There is a lot of casual work. The shifts are very irregular at Wal-Mart. On paper, Wal-Mart pays minimum wage. But after certain deductions, it comes out as lower than minimum wage.

A housewife who cannot work full-time because of children take jobs in Wal-Mart as part-time workers. But the hours are very irregular.

In factories, wages are higher and you get a lot of overtime. On the other hand, Wal-Mart will not owe workers wages and will fail to pay them on time, like construction employers might. Wal-Mart will pay medical insurance, and so they don’t break the law in that respect.

MT: There have been reports of the ACFTU being more willing to assert itself, in particular in foreign-owned enterprises. Is that the case?

AC: I came back from a conference with NGOs in the Shenzhen region three weeks ago and the situation is very bad. They think that the ACFTU is not doing much. The ACFTU has set up a legal aid office in the trade union building, but the workers generally don’t trust it. If you go to the ACFTU, they don’t do anything. That’s what the NGOs told me.

The Guangzhou trade union was generally seen as quite good because they had quite a reformist chairperson, Chen Weizhong. I will hear a lot about, but he retired a year ago and nothing is happening now.

Because Wal-Mart tries to avoid violating the law, some Wal-Mart workers are quite old — they are in their 40s. I recently met some of them in South China. Wal-Mart is trying to get rid of them so that they will not have to pay social security. The workers are trying to get organised over the internet, in order to fight Wal-Mart.

Some of their activists are in touch with American Wal-Mart workers, which in China is a very dangerous, very risky thing to do.
Density and decline

Bob Carnegie

The crisis in Australian unionism is one of great concern to all working-class activists. In a series of articles I will criticise some of the current trends and try to show that there are ways out.

The main tools I have at my disposal are nearly 40 years of militant trade union and working-class activism and wide (but not devastating) socialist theory. I hope these articles are of interest. Whether they are instructive and helpful, that is for others to decide.

If a union movement’s societal influence is primarily based on relative union density, the current state of unionism in Australia is the lowest at least since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Is it not a case of economic structural adjustment moving across the developed world? Is it the aggressive stance of right wing governments since the 1980s?

Is it a problem in trade unions themselves being unable to adapt to changing circumstances?

In reality, particularly in Australia, it is a combination of all three. However in Australia the leaders of many of the larger unions have played a role in their own collapse.

In 1974, 55% of the work force were members of unions. Twenty years later, in 1994, the figure was 42%. In 2014 the figure is approximately 17%.

This is a collapse of immense importance. Proportionately it is a greater collapse than in the United States, where private sector unionism sits around 6.5%.

In Australia there has been a marked decline in the manufacturing base. A once quite strong car-making industry (I worked in a Ford factory for a couple of spectacular months in the early 80s) will turn off its last light in 2016. Australian steel making of any type on a large scale is almost non-existent.

The coal, clothing and footwear are now almost cottage industries.

The push by big business has been into service industries and mining. Australia’s two major export earners are iron ore and coal. The third largest export earner is education. Universities in Australia can charge exorbitant fees for overseas students.

Mining

If we look at the hard rock and coal industries, we can observe some of the strategies big business has used in its attempts to “free” itself from the restraints imposed by a unionised workforce.

In the late 1980s transnational mining houses, led firstly by Rio Tinto and more lately by the world’s largest mining house BHP Billiton, have carried on an assault againstorganised labour.

In hard rock mining (particularly iron ore and bauxite) workers’ collective agreements have been replaced in the main by non-union agreements.

The mighty Pilbara unions were shattered in less than five years. 90% plus union density was reduced in a brief period to less than 10% of the workforce. Unions became fundamentally powerless to defend the few remaining members.

In coal mining the assault has included virtually all of the big mining houses, including one “union friendly” BHP Billiton.

Coal miners had a long history of militant unionism. Up to the early 90s, not an ounce of Australian coal was dug under union control.

Things began to change quite abruptly after Rio turned a massive underground coal mine, Gordonstone, into a non-union mine named Kestrel. In around 15 years non-union coal mines accounted for 40% of the nation’s coal output.

Companies in the vastness of the Queensland West make it difficult for the miners’ union to organise.

Companies use By In / Fly out miners. They tend to do 7×12 hour shifts and then get flown back to their homes on the coast. The miners live in camps.

Mining companies have a policy of not hiring relatives of miners, thus further weakening the union influence.

The coal miners union has been slow to respond and in collapse in numbers, although bad, has been until now been offset by a coal boom.

A cheap shot from Ofsted

By a Tower Hamlets teacher

Ofsted has put seven schools in Tower Hamlets into special measures, suggesting that they have not taken reasonable steps to ensure that students, staff and governors understand the risks posed by extremism.

Six of them are Islamic private schools, and one is a Church of England secondary foundation school.

The left should not defend the private faith schools which have been found to teach a very narrow curriculum, excluding the arts, and fail to challenge prejudiced attitudes towards women and people of different sexualities.

Such schools should be abolished.

The seventh school, Sir John Cass Red Coat, is a faith school. “A Church of England school that actively encourages a religious commitment from all faiths in the student community”.

Despite that, the information we have suggests a case for defending John Cass. It suggests that Ofsted has acted against John Cass as a cheap way of showing that it is “doing something” about Islamism.

Social evolution says that any extremism would be put an equalities agenda at the heart of the curriculum — both formal and hidden. If Ofsted and the government were serious about gender equality (which they now describe as a “British value”), they would see to it that all our schools were taken back into local authority control and made democratically accountable to the communities they serve.

Our schools need to embody the richness of inner-city life. They should be places that open children’s minds to a whole world of ideas and options, and that patiently guide children on a journey of self-discovery and show no tolerance of prejudice.

The subtlety and skill needed to teach values-based education stands in stark contrast to the crass patronising interventions of Ofsted. There are rumours that Ofsted inspectors have recently asked primary schools in Tower Hamlets where they hang their Union Jack and whether all the children know the words to the national anthem.

There should be no place for religious indoctrination in our schools; and there should also be no place for nationalism.

John Cass was “inadequate” for two main reasons. Firstly, a link from a sixth-form society social media page led to some malodorous tweets by an Islamobiculated student. “One positive states that any sixth form students who attended a ‘leavers’ party’ and engaged in “free-mixing” or “listening to music” would face ‘severe consequences later”.” Secondly, the social spaces with academic sides and religious groups, which were going to gender.

The head teacher may have shown some hubris in not seeking advice on the issue of internet safety with regards to religious extremism, but it is difficult to monitor the internet use of hundreds of students.

Asking schools to be responsible for teaching and facilitating internet safety is not unreasonable. But for Ofsted to downgrade a school from “outstanding” (in its last Ofsted report) to “inadequate” because it failed to pick up on the posting seems unreasonable.

According to teachers at the school, the separate playgrounds and common rooms for boys and girls came about 20 years ago when there were very few girls at the school. It seems reasonable to create some girl-only spaces to help girls grow in confidence as a minority in the school.

But that was 20 years ago. Surely 20 years is enough to achieve the high goal of students of different genders enjoying one another’s company within a culture of respect.

However, John Cass has been graded as “outstanding” by Ofsted in two previous inspections, with exactly the same social provision for its children — separated according to gender. Tower Hamlets has several schools that are not co-educational. This is not unusual, and not usually an argument for putting a school into special measures.

So what exactly is going on here?

One reason Tower Hamlets is a target is because it has very few academies and yet achieves good results in relation to the national averages. So far, it has not fallen victim to the government’s agenda of privatising the education system. It demonstrates that success is possible without it.

Perhaps more importantly, after the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham, and with the ongoing war in Syria, Tower Hamlets is an obvious place to come looking for children at risk of Islamist radicalisation. Tower Hamlets is the only local authority in the country where Muslims are the largest single religious group, so schools in Tower Hamlets have additional challenges in terms of safeguarding against Islamist influence.

And as Tower Hamlets teachers, we have additional responsibilities to make sure our young people grow up feeling respected and understood despite widespread anti-Muslim racism.

We know that Islamists pose a direct physical threat to the safety of others, especially other Muslims, in our community.

SECULAR

Teachers in Tower Hamlets are in a highly-charged political situation and need to know how to respond to it.

Key to navigating this political terrain is a commitment to secularism.

The government’s contribution here is to promote faith schools on the one hand and impose the “Prevent Strategy” on the other.

The Prevent Strategy is supposed to stop people becoming “violent extremists” capable of “mass murder”. It sets out guidelines for monitoring the public and highlighting those at risk of “radicalisation”. One aspect of its work in schools is the teaching of “British values” across the curriculum. British values as defined by this government apparently include “democracy” and “equality”.

Prevent has hired specialists to design resources for teachers to help them discuss controversial issues in an effort to guide the workforce into tackling extremism in the classroom.

But the target-driven culture of education embraced by this government, even more than those before it, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum and the squeezing of opportunities for discussion and debate of matters relevant to our students’ lives. The culture of suspicion and fear propagated by Gove, more than any other Secretary for Education before him, has left teachers feeling paralysed when faced with difficult conversations.

For a small number of our students, the risk of Islamist “radicalisation” is real. It needs a more sophisticated response than either Ofsted or the government’s Prevent Strategy is providing.

An education that has the universal values of equality and democracy at its core; that provides children with opportunities to debate, discuss, explore and listen to a wide range of experiences and opinions; that is comprehensive and secular — that gives the best chance of helping young people avoid religious extremism and deal with national and racist bigotry.

John Cass Red Coat: made an example?
College staff set to strike

By Gemma Short

Following a re-ballot which resulted in a high 83% in favour of strikes on a 58% turnout, Lambeth College UCU will be on their first day of new strikes on Thursday 4 December.

The dispute is over changes to contracts which see two weeks cut off annual holidays, a massive reduction in sick pay entitlement, and extra hours of teaching without extra pay. UCU members at Lambeth college were re-balloted following a court injunction against their previous indefinite strike plan.

Mandy Brown, UCU branch secretary, said “The strike action taken so far has resulted in some small improvements to the offer made by management. But they do not go far enough. If there is no acceptable offer from management, the action will escalate with two further days on Tuesday & Wednesday 9 and 10 December, then three more days on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday 15, 16 and 17th December. The action will continue after the Christmas break if necessary.”

Recent communications from the college Principal states there will be no imposition of the new contract for existing staff. However UCU members are determined to make sure there is no new contract for any staff, new or existing. A similar restructuring of contracts is happening at Barnsley college. UCU members there were on strike on 26 and 27 November.

There will be a rally in support of Lambeth UCU at the Clapham centre between 12 and 1 on 4 December.

- Messages of support to mandybrowncow@ymail.com (Lambeth) and lshort@barnsley.ac.uk (Barnsley)

Lewisham: hands off our schools!

By a Lewisham NUT member

Over 50 activists met on Monday 17 November to discuss how to prevent a large number of Lewisham’s secondary schools becoming academies.

The activists were predominantly school workers, both teachers and support workers. The NUT and GMB both gave commitments that they would ballot workers for industrial action, in schools in the borough, where the governors of the school refuse to rule out going for academy status.

The schools we know are discussing academy plans are Bonus Pastoral, Hilly Fields, Ladywell Fields, Pendergast Vale and Sedgehill. There are rumours that other schools may also be considering trying to become academies.

The fact that so many schools in the borough are planning to attempt to convert at around the same time suggests some co-ordination. It also presents those of us who support democratically controlled, accountable, education coordinated across the borough with a significant challenge, but also an opportunity. If these initial schools are successful then surely more will follow in their wake and the effectiveness of the Local Education Authority will be smashed, leading again to more schools to consider converting.

However, the fact that so many schools are considering it at the same time gives us the opportunity to unite workers and parents at schools across the borough. In Lewisham a massive local campaign stopped the closure of the A&E and maternity wards at the hospital.

We will need a similar campaign to stop the academies, but this time the labour movement will be more central.

- More information: on.fb.me/1yrPG3P

Tube strikes for sacked workmate

By Tubeworker

Rail union RMT reps and activists were feeling rightly chuffed with themselves on the picket line at Morden train crew depot on Monday 1 December.

A majority of members of both RMT and drivers’ union ASLEF showed support for the strike for the reinstatement of sacked train driver Alex McGui gan. Alex failed a breathalyser test, but the company is refusing to take into account circumstances like Alex’s diabetes, which could give false positives. They also flouted standard procedure by only testing a urine sample for drugs, rather than alcohol, and then destroying a second sample.

London Underground (LU) has carried out a spate of unjust sackings — Vicki Hayward, Noel Roberts and Alex McGui gan amongst them — indicating that LU feels it can get away with bending its own rules while unions battle job cuts and station closures as part of the “Fit for the future on stations” plan. Whilst unions must not take their eye off the fight against station job cuts, we must also make sure unions fight effectively against these unjust sackings.

The support for the Morden depot strike provides a good basis to escalate the fight against unjust sackings.

RMT union RMT should step up the fight to reinstate Alex to include all drivers on the Northern line. Strikes to reinstate CSAs Vicki and Noel should also be co-ordinated.

- More information: bit.ly/12kxJIS

QEH strikers in talks

By Charlotte Zalens

Talks between the GMB and management at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woolwich, are due to take place in December in the dispute over a two-tier workforce.

Strikes on 24 and 25 of November were well supported. GMB organiser Nadine Houghton said “The few workers who didn’t feel able to strike last time decided to join GMB and come out this time because they found out that the USS workers are paid more on other sites and that other sites are also better staffed.”

Solidarity will report on progress in the talks and news of more strikes as we hear it.

- Read an interview with strikers: bit.ly/QEHIstrike

Firefighters battle government austerity

By Darren Bedford

Firefighters showed the government the depth of their anger over pensions and cuts last week when they successfully disrupted a planned media event around a new fire station in south London on 25 November.

Fire minister Penny Mordaunt was met by 200 angry firefighters when she arrived at the new West Norwood fire station, blocking the entrance and preventing the car from getting in. As the vehicle sped away, cries of “1 – 0 to the FBU!” rang out.

After police reinforcements arrived, the minister returned and managed to get into the building. However she was met with loud booping on the outside and the refusal of firefighters to meet with her on the inside.

Firefighters were protesting about the government’s imposed pension changes that would see them forced to work to 60 or lose nearly half their pension. During this government over 5,000 firefighters’ jobs have been cut and 39 fire stations closed.

The FBU (Fire Brigades Unions) has refused to accept these austerity measures and continues its industrial, political and legal campaign. Firefighters in England today will strike again for 24 hours from 09.00 on Tuesday 9 December, while firefighters in Scotland and Wales will take action short of a strike after concessions there.
Protests continue as killer cop rakes it in

By Ira Berkovic

Yet more evidence has emerged which highlights the shocking injustice committed by failing to indict Darren Wilson, the white police officer who killed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, USA.

A report by Lawrence O’Donnell, an MSNBC journalist and broadcaster, showed that St Louis County prosecutors supplied the Grand Jury with outdated information about the law on police officers’ rights to use deadly force. They only corrected their mistake three days before Darren Wilson testified, and then without substantial explanation or elaboration.

Much of the Grand Jury’s deliberations were based on an outdated and as it turned out unconstitutional interpretation of the law.

Meanwhile, 20-year-old DeAndre Joshua, thought to be a friend of Dorian Johnson, who was with Michael Brown when he died, has been found dead. Joshua was shot in the head before his body was covered in gasoline and incinerated. His body was found near Canfield Green Apartments, the same housing complex where Brown was killed.

Darren Wilson has now resigned from the police force. Although he will not receive severance pay and his pension, he has become a millionaire, receiving $500,000 in media fees and the same again in supportive “donations”, presumably from racists sympathetic to his cause.

Not only has the American justice system failed to punish him for the killing, he has effectively been rewarded.

The Grand Jury’s decision not to indict him sparked huge protests in cities across America. Thousands of protesters in New York stopped traffic on the Manhattan Bridge, and attempted to dismantle police barricades to cross the Williamsburg Bridge between Manhattan and Brooklyn.

CHICAGO

Protests in Chicago held a sit-down demonstration inside Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s office.

Demonstrators have also continued in Ferguson, with activists travelling from across the country. One group of over 300 met in St Louis to vote on a list of demands, which included the sacking of Ferguson Police Chief Tom Jackson.

Other planned actions included a 120-mile march from Ferguson to Missouri Governor Jay Nixon’s mansion in Jefferson City, scheduled to begin on 29 November.

Nixon’s response to the demonstrations has been to call for greater funding for the National Guard, a reserve military force the American state uses to quell social unrest.

In the days preceding and following the Grand Jury’s decision, American police shot and killed at least two more young black people – Akai Gurley, 28, killed on Friday 21 November in Brooklyn, and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio, gunned down on Saturday 22 November. The NYPD has said the killing of Gurley was an “accident”, committed by a rookie cop. Police in Ohio mistook Rice’s BB gun for a real weapon, despite the 911 caller who reported seeing him say the gun was “probably fake”.

The killings, along with similar incidents in recent years such as the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, amount to what many in black communities feel is a declaration of war on black children and youths by the American state.

The persistent failure to punish any of the killer cops sends the signal that the police are authorised to carry out summary executions of black youths if they suspect them of the least wrongdoing or feel in the least bit threatened by them.

On Wednesday 26 November thousands of protesters marched through London demanding justice for Michael Brown and other victims of police racism.

Organised by London Black Revolutionaries (LBR), the protest started as a rally at the US embassy before marching down Oxford Street, stopping the traffic, and continuing on to Parliament and Scotland Yard.

The demonstration was lively, with chants including “from London to Ferguson, no justice, no peace!” and “Who killed Mike Brown? Police killed Mike Brown!”.

Black Friday strike in retail

By Ollie Moore

Retail workers in America struck on Friday 29 November, the “Black Friday” shopping day when stores offer huge discounts, as part of an ongoing movement against low pay.

In the run-up to Black Friday, workers held protest to build for the strike, with one sit-in at a Los Angeles Walmart resulting in 23 arrests.

Strikes are organised locally by community action groups and workers’ centres, backed by the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

The strike follows similar walkouts called on “Black Friday” in 2013 and 2012, coincided with a consumer boycott called in protest at the Grand Jury’s decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson for killing black teenager Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

There has already been significant crossover between America’s growing low-paid workers’ movement and the protests against police brutality and racism in Ferguson.

Many Ferguson fast food workers involved in the “Fight for $15” movement also participated in protests following Mike Brown’s killing in August, and workers from the local branch of fast food chain Chipotle delivered over $1,000 worth of food to demonstrators.

The fast food, retail, and service sectors are significant employers of black workers.

The convergence of the movements against low pay and against police brutality and racism highlighted the twin struggles of America’s black community against class exploitation and racist oppression.