Between 16 May and 29 June, students in Britain’s schools will write around 16 million exam papers. A scurry of marking will then, in August, produce a stream of gradings, which will be used to exert market-type discipline on students, teachers, and schools.

Increasingly, the whole education system is geared to this exercise in market-type discipline. The drive of the Tories’ Education White Paper is to gear it even more that way, to increase competition, insecurity, and stereotyped measurement.

STOP TORY PLANS FOR SCHOOLS!
The annual fete organised by the French revolutionary socialist group Lutte Ouvrière in grounds in a village near Paris drew large crowds again this year on 14-16 May 2016. The fete draws between 20,000 and 30,000 people each year. Workers’ Liberty ran a stall and a forum this year, as we (or our forerunners) have done almost every year since the early 70s, and a number of new friends of Workers’ Liberty came to enjoy the weekend event. Above Lutte Ouvrière debates the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste

French railworkers strike

On Wednesday 11 May the Hollande-Valls Socialist Party government in France forced the anti-worker Labour Law through without a parliamentary vote, using a piece of the constitution which allows laws to be adopted without a vote unless the government loses a vote of no confidence.

Trade unions and left activists have been fighting the law for months, and college and university students have been staging protests and sit-ins against the law.

The government has also been trying to change conditions for railworkers in the state-run SNCF. The fight against the Labour Law is closely linked to this as railworkers’ are one of the strongest sections of the labour movement. Luca, a rail worker, spoke to Solidarity.

The union leaders have done everything they can to put off the start of an open-ended strike; but the leaders of the [more left-wing, minority] SUDRail and FO federations have called an open-ended strike to begin from 17 May.

The CGT is only calling for a two-day strike. Revolutionary militant sections of the SUD and the FO are calling for a very long strike. For example, in my local union, on 9 March, we sent a motion to our national leadership, calling for an open-ended strike. But it is becoming clear that the CGT leadership is absolutely against such an action and are trying to get round that. For example, the CGT union at the Austerlitz station in Paris has called for open-ended action alongside the minority unions, without waiting for the nod from the national union.

I think this will bring the whole CGT federation into the strike, if people move without waiting for the leadership.

The management plan to get rid of the current railway working regulations, and to replace them with a decree from the government, and with a collective agreement.

According to what we’ve heard, this would mean getting rid of 10 out of 27 days holiday in a year; having a 48-hour working week with only one rest day in the week; and lots more flexible working.

In France the situation is very different from the UK. The SNCF has 150,000 workers. There are private companies within the network which may employ around 5,000 workers.

About ten years ago the network was opened to competition, mainly in goods freight. Conditions for private company workers are much worse than in the public sector, much fewer rest days, much more work. The motivation for the current reforms is to “equalise” the conditions of public sector rail workers with those of the private sector.

There is a plan to open up competition for regional passenger transport by 2017, but currently there are virtually no private passenger carriers on the network.

When rail workers became aware of management’s plans, the immediate reaction was a very strong mobilisation. The first strike day was 9 March, and on that day in some places the strike was observed by 80-90% of workers. From early March there was a support for an open-ended strike.

But the action of the union leaderships put a powerful brake on things, and all we have been able to pull together since then has been additional one-off strike days in April.

Chávez proposed a new economic model consisting of a mixed economy with the state in a strategic role and with the state intervening to influence the needs of the Venezuelan business class, a model that still relies on oil revenue.

This deepened the country’s dependency on oil income. For businesses, it’s always cheaper to import than to invest because then they can obtain dollars much more easily.

For Chávez [this] would encourage the business class to invest more in internal production. But this never happened. Thus, we get to the alarming situation where 98 percent of our export income is from the oil fields, with 2 percent from everything else. This difference had never been so great.

Chávez’s politics were very state-centred, and he always limited what he could do. The Venezuelan state is a capitalist institution, and for this reason, it always remained dominated by a central paternalist institution, not a revolutionary one.

With Maduro, there was a political change in relation to Chávez’s regime that accelerated after the “peace talks” of 2014 (negotiations between the government and key business leaders in 2014 that Maduro convened in response to a wave of protests and violence led by middle- and upper-class youth organizations). With Chávez, it’s always the workers who suffer the most.

Wages are deteriorating extremely rapidly. There is a lack of basic necessities, which is important because the government has reduced imports by as much as 30 percent from 2012 levels. Social conditions are very bad, and the sense of insecurity has increased dramatically. There are also signs of new diseases, the reappearance of extreme poverty. All public services are eroding. And to top it off, we are experiencing a drought, and 70 percent of our energy comes from hydro power.

When we entered the PSUV, there was a total of four or five mile-million legislators who participated in community assemblies of hundreds of people.

But as time wore on, the PSUV became a party of the caste, and the vehicle by which the leadership negotiates and reaches agreement with the leading opposition figures and with the traditional right wing in Venezuela. The party has lost all its participatory and democratic character.

One of the main factors in the crisis [all over Latin America] is represented by Chávez’s death. In Latin America since 2000, there were two projects being contested: Chávez’s project, which sought Latin American integration to break with financial capital, the extraction of natural resources by transnational companies, and the creation of Mercosur. Chávez was, of course, influenced by Lula’s ideas as well — that was one of the movements of retreat in Venezuela. But I’m talking about contesting projects, because Chávez served to mobilise the people of Latin America against imperialism.

With his death, the crisis was accentuated because in his absence, a period of staleness emerged, which coincided with the impact of the worldwide economic crisis hitting South America. There has been a huge drop in the price of commodities — not just oil — and that has brought an increase in debt servicing in Argentina and Brazil, the most important countries of Latin America economically.

So we see... the end of the progressive cycle known as the pink tide... electoral defeats for Evo Morales in Bolivia, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina and Maduro here in Venezuela — plus we will see how things develop with Dilma Rousseff in Brazil.

At the same time, new cycles of popular mobilization have arisen, mostly around environmental issues, racism, LGBT rights, etc. These issues have an anti-imperialist character because they are focused on the government. These struggles, however, expose the weaknesses of the traditional left-wing parties that implemented progressive measures only halfway during the previous cycle. They had an opportunity to create an alternative to the politics of the right, and yet they didn’t do it. Nor are they going to do it.

That’s what we, as the revolutionary left, have left to do. We have to create that alternative.

• Full interview here venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11933
Higher Uni fees and private providers

By the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts

The government’s Higher Education White Paper, released on Monday 16 May, is a clear ideological attack on students, workers, and universities as public institutions. Here are our initial responses.

Free Education is “value for money”

One of things we keep hearing about from the government is that universities need to be “value for money”. This value will come from bringing in more “choice” for students in where and what they study.

This is very much an illusion and we should treat it as such. When you have to pay at least £9,000 a year upfront, you don’t have a proper choice. Students are valued only as consumers. The only choice they are offered is where to spend their money. The proposals are vague on Student Unions, mentioning more government oversight and scrutiny into how their funding is used. Really the only true value for money option is free education.

The privatisation of the UK’s higher education system

We’re seeing a gradual end to public higher education in this country. Under the proposals, we will see private providers—universities failing but what they most working class and BME students. The institutions most at risk have participation such as London Met.

There are a couple of silver linings. We’ve seen the government drop the idea to exempt universities from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests—so that the process for lifting the fee cap won’t change — it will still require a vote in Parliament. The plans to introduce marketisation of education Queen’s University Belfast completely cutting sociology is just one example. The White Paper will make this more common.

There are a couple of silver linings. We’ve seen the government drop the idea to exempt universities from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests—so that the process for lifting the fee cap won’t change — it will still require a vote in Parliament. The plans to introduce variable fees have also been delayed, although not abandoned. This buys us more time to fight them.

What does “Teaching Quality” mean for workers?

The flagship proposal in the HE White Paper is the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Proposed to mirror the much detested Research Excellence Framework (REF), the TEF measures neither “teaching” nor “excellence” in any sense that you would imagine, but looks at things such as graduate employment to see if teaching is “excellent”.

This will undoubtedly lead to metric-driven teaching and increased pressure on staff to meet pointless targets rather than a focus on teaching. It will also justify universities continuing to casualise teaching staff. Casualised teachers cannot teach as well as teachers on fixed contracts due to stress, financial pressures, and having to find employment in summer months.

Moreover lecturers’ pay has fallen by 14.5% in real terms since 2009 and UCU members (the academics’ trade union) will be going on strike on 25-26 May 2016 over ‘excellent’ pay including the ever persistent gender pay gap.

Does the White Paper “put students at its heart”?

If by students you mean a plant future workforce, then yes. It is quite clear to all that the government calling the White Paper “student centric” is a highly cynical move. It’s about getting private providers in Higher Education and dressing it up as “choice”.

It’s also about pleasing big business — employers will be represented on TEF review panels, which means that Apple and BP could influence the curriculum. When the government talk about “student choice,” they mean making the “right kind of choice” — to get a job. But might be a good time to mention that graduate employment is far more linked to what your parents do than what you study, and students from liberation groups are more likely to struggle on the job market regardless of their degree.

Under these measures, university education would mean nothing but expensive training for the job you won’t get. You cannot have a truly transformative, liberating education when the trade-off is a lifetime of debt. Competition under the guise of choice will not give us the education we want and need. Only robust public funding, more democracy and collaboration between staff and students can do that.

Junior doctors: deal imminent?

By a junior doctor

On Saturday 14 May the BMA held a junior doctors’ conference, followed by a meeting of the junior doctors’ committee on the next day.

It was hoped that these meetings would have heard the outcome of renewed negotiations held between the government and the BMA between 9-13 May. However a last minute agreement (brokered by Brendan Barber of all people) to extend the talks for another week meant that junior doctors did not get a chance to give judgement on any proposed deal. An announcement from the negotiations is expected on Wednesday 18 May; at the moment it is impossible to tell what the result will be but it does look like there has been movement in the talks. Junior doctors will need to analyse any deal carefully. And any deal will be put to a referendum of BMA junior doctor members and to medical students within two years of finishing their degree.

Junior doctors’ conference voted for greater collaboration with other unions and organised health based events with other unions — a step forward.

However a motion in favour of the BMA affiliating to the TUC, put by left-wing activists, was defeated with arguments that the TUC was “too political” and “too left-wing”.

Why we need to fight the NSS and DLHE

The government has proposed an increase in fees linked to TEF, in large part using scores from the National Student Survey and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (the survey taken six months after graduation looking at employment).

This measure has been delayed until TEF Year 2, which is academic year 2017/18. Then, institutions that score highly will be able increase fees in line with inflation, and by the 2018/19 the government would introduce varied levels of fee caps.

The NSS and DLHE are key parts of the TEF, the central pillar of the government’s proposals. We have proposed to wreck them with the policy passed at NUS, calling for a boycott or a sabotage of the surveys. A successful boycott or sabotage will render these surveys useless, thus destroying the credibility of TEF.

We now need to pass motions supporting the boycott/sabotage at as many student unions as possible.

From the start of the new term NCAFC will be running campaigns up and down the country to collect pledges from finalists agreeing to boycott or sabotage the 2017 NSS and 2018 DLHE.

• Find out more at anticuts.com
Leaving principles for later?

THE LEFT
By Martin Thomas

At the Lutte Ouvrière fete on 14-16 May we met comrades from Izar (Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Left), a group expelled in 2015 from the “Mandellite” (Fourth International) organisation in Spain because they called for a stance more independent from the leadership of Podemos, the new broad leftish party.

The following critique is part of a document published by Izar with sympathisers in France, the USA, Germany, Greece, and Italy.

“...There has been no balance-sheet on the many attempts to build ‘broad parties’ over the last 25 years by the sections of the Fourth International.

“...Whether in the framework of Syriza, of Podemos, or before that with Rifondazione in Italy, the PT in Brazil, the Bloco de Esquerda [Left Block] in Portugal, or even within the NPA [in France], the leadership of the Fourth International has followed a policy that has been limited to entering (or launching) broad organisations without simultaneously building demarcated revolutionary currents or organisations. This has led to the dissolution (Portugal, Denmark) or the dispersion (Italy, Brazil, France...) of whole sections.

“The support by Rifondazione for the formation of a bourgeois government (the Prodi government in 2006) and the vote for war...”

Make high salaries public

LETTER
Elizabeth Butterworth is right to highlight the threat the Tories’ White Paper on broadcasting poses to the BBC (“Don’t Close the BBC”, Solidarity 404).

One minor reservation: if it’s hard to argue with the White Paper calling for presenters’ wages to be made public... Shouldn’t we be in favour of the high salaries paid by the Corporation to its executives and “stars” being made public?

On the issue of bias towards and interference from Government, I think this operates on three levels.

Firstly, there is interference by ministers in programming, by lobbying or seeking to influence the composition of the BBC board, either directly through their contacts or by threatening its licence fee revenue.

Secondly, the Corporation in its news coverage has a “small c” conservative outlook, generally favouring the status quo, whatever that is. If often therefore echoes the Government: pro-EU, anti-Scottish independence, pro-Trident, pro-monarchy etc.

Finally, the BBC’s political correspondents are much more focussed on Westminster and its backroom battles than others, notably Channel 4’s Michael Crick who has almost single-handedly exposed the abuse of election expenses in dozens of constituencies at the last General Election.

Matthew Thompson, Manchester

“Peak stuff”? Time for socialism!

By Colin Foster

Steve Howard, a manager at Ikea, says: “In the west, we have probably hit peak stuff. We talk about peak oil. I’d say we’ve hit peak red meat, peak sugar, peak stuff... peak home furnishings.”

Other people studying retail markets have come up with similar ideas. Kevin Jenkins, a manager at the Visa credit-card company, says: “We increasingly see a trend for consumers to spend more on experiences rather than on products”.

Lorna Hall, a market-researcher, says: “People are interested in servicing a lifestyle rather than buying stuff”.

Dan Nixon of the Bank of England claims that orthodoxy of “economic theory generally assumes that more consumption means greater happiness. [In fact] we may achieve greater happiness by seeking to simplify our desires, rather than satisfy them... The result is less consumption yet more utility”.

On one level, this is babble. Even in relatively-rich Britain, many people lack the “stuff” of a decent place to live, and rely on food banks for “stuff” to eat. According to official research published on 17 May, 6.5% of people in Britain are in long-term poverty, but maybe a third are likely to be in poverty at least for a spell during a three-year period.

On another level, the “babble” tells us something profound. Leon Trotsky wrote that the precondition for a socialist society was that “the steady growth of social wealth has made us bilpeds forget our miserly attitude toward every excess minute of labour, and our humiliating fear about the size of our ration”. For the middle-class, and a swathe of better-off workers too — the people these market-researchers focus on — we’re getting there. And it would take only the first steps of socialist reorganisation to bring the whole population up to that level.

In a capitalist society, a huge advertising industry — £20 billion a year in the UK, £300 a year for every child, woman, and man — bombards us continuously and cleverly with messages that consuming more, more, more is the way to happiness. You need a new smartphone now! You need a new car!

Things would be different with even the beginnings of socialist reorganisation. Yet even now, even under capitalist bombardment, a lot of people recognise a better life comes more through shared experiences, which can’t be bought, than through competitively consuming more “stuff”.

With food, the transition happened a while back. For a long epoch of human history, the rich were fat and tall, and the poor were thin and short. Now, a rich person does not necessarily eat more than even a modestly-getting-by worker.

For a long epoch, too, access to music other than your own and your friends’ sing-song with the simplest instruments was limited to the rich. Now everyone can get music free or cheap from the internet.

For a long epoch, too, access to music other than your own and your friends’ sing-song with the simplest instruments was limited to the rich. Now everyone can get music free or cheap from the internet.

Anti-socialists have long argued that it is irrepressible human nature always to want more “stuff”. There will never be enough to go round. The capitalist market system may have its faults, they say, but it is a more efficient and robust system of managing the inevitable competitive scramble than the only alternative: rationing from above by authorities who will always take the “stuff” for themselves first.

Now there is enough to go round. The problem is that it doesn’t go “round”, and that the capitalist structure of society systematically blights and makes difficult, for many, the social experiences that go beyond “stuff”.

Have we reached “peak stuff”?
Thus, the exam system is about students “buying,” through exam grades, a place at a “good university”. And that in turn, almost regardless of what knowledge the students retain or don’t retain from their university studies, “buys” them a good chance of a well-paid job.

The Social Mobility Commission, in its 2014 report, found that only 10 per cent of the top graduate employers target more than 30 universities to recruit new workers, out of a total of nearer 120.

That’s not because you learn nothing at the other 90 universities. It is because the employers base recruitment much more on ability and willingness to jump through hoops — as evidenced by getting to and through a “good” university — than on whatever particular knowledge students have crammed into their heads to pass exams.

For many jobs, they insist you’ve passed uni exams, but don’t care in what, or whether you retain what you crammed for the exam. The “performance” of the exam is what matters, not the intellectual content.

When Microsoft, for example, recruits graduates, it asks for: “2:1 or higher in any relevant discipline”. PriceWaterhouseCooper wants those with “2:1 or above in any degree discipline”.

Over 200,000 of the average cohort of about half a million students in British universities are studying social sciences, humanities, psychology, arts, usually with little specific relevance to their subsequent jobs.

Some 80,000 are studying “business”, but what’s important about business courses, for jobs, is just that they “sort” some people into the category of having got passed uni exams, rather than anything they teach.

Research in the USA has found that more than one in three uni students graduates with no improvement in writing and analytical skills. Business students, 89% of surveyed employers said that they prefer students from what the USA calls “liberal arts” to business graduates.

**TRADE**

At the other end, academy chains and “entrepreneurial” head teachers trade on student exam grades for success to get government funds.

The recent exposure of Liam Nolan shows how that segues into regular capitalist market economics and profit-grabbing. Nolan spoke at Tory party conference as Michael Gove’s star head teacher. David Cameron personally praised him. He became “CEO” of expanding academy chains.

Now Nolan has been forced to resign because “his” academies were paying large sums, without contracts, to a company, Nexus Schools Ltd, which in turn paid cash to him, on top of his declared salary, through a business of which he was the sole director.

The relentless pseudo-market pressure squeezes out real education, creativity, imagination, life, from students and teachers alike. Many subjects are marginalised. Others, like mathematics, are reduced to stereotyped mechanical procedures, because those are easy material for setting exams and marking them cheaply.

The great 20th century mathematician David Hilbert famously remarked of a student who gave up maths in order to become a poet: “Good. He did not have enough imagination to become a mathematician”. But the exam boards’ thin substitute for maths is almost imagination-free.


The fight against the Education White Paper should become a springboard for a fight for real education, without exams, grades, and league tables.
The revolution that has just begun can have but one outcome: the realisation of socialism!

The working class, in order to accomplish its purpose, must, first of all, secure entire political power. Without political power, the entire people cannot enjoy prosperity, all must share in it. It is the instrument with which labour will achieve the complete, fundamental reconversion to the common property of all. Today all wealth, the largest and most fruitful tracts of land, the mines, the mills and the factories belong to a small group of Junkers and private capitalists. From them the great masses of the labouring class receive a scanty wage in return for long hours of arduous toil, hardly enough for a decent livelihood.

The enrichment of a small class of idlers is the purpose and end of present-day society. The masses are merely tools to modern production a new impulse and a new purpose—that is the foremost duty of the revolutionary working class.

To this end all social wealth, the land and all that the producers make must be taken from their exploiting owners and placed under social control. But... the most difficult task, the creation of an entirely new foundation upon which a new society is based, has only just begun.

Today production in every manufacturing unit is conducted by the individual capitalist who devotes all of his time and energy to the extraction of the greatest possible profit for himself. But the way in which the worker, the machine and the productive instruments are utilised... to produce wealth for private use and neglecting the general welfare, isами: to ensure successful production a new impulse and a new purpose must be introduced into the workday, so all tools of murder. Instead the precious machines and the enormous labour power that was devoted to this purpose will be used for useful production. The manufacture of useless and costly foolishness for the edification of wealthy people will stop. Personal service will be prohibited, and the labour power thus released will find more useful and more worthy employment...

WORK UNDER SOCIALISM

Today labour in industry, on the farm and in the office is usually a torture and a burden to the proletarian. Men and women work because they must in order to obtain the necessities of life.

In a capitalist state of society, where all work together for their own well-being, the health of the individual worker, and his joy in his work must be conscientiously fostered and sustained. Short hours of labour not only will provide for the needs of the worker but will also provide for the production of commodities. But what are needed for useful production? The purpose of useful production is to advance the prosperity of society.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the economic interests of the capitalist himself are identical with those of the working class.
Socialism makes sense

public ownership and planning. The equation of socialism with bureaucratic state ownership, as James Connolly pointed out, would make “the army, the navy, the police, the judges, the gaolers, the informers, and the hangmen, all would be socialist functionaries”. Ironically, the free market capitalists reached for “bankers’ socialism” during the crash in 2008, nationalising the risks and milking the public finances to keep their ship afloat, only to make workers’ pay to bail out the system.

Socialism is both the ideal of working class self-rule but also a concrete goal that can be understood in terms of the best humanity has developed under capitalism. Socialism is human solidarity raised from a system of working-class bonding in resistance to our exploiters to be the guiding principle of all society. It is the enthronement of unfeathered reason armed with enlightenment and democracy in all the social, economic and political affairs of society. Society will collectively own and democratically control and administer the bulk of productive wealth. Every major industry will be reorganised roughly like the NHS at its ideal best — with full provision for need as its reigning principle. It will be democratically controlled by workers, by consumers, and by the overall community.

CLASS

The second major objection to socialism revolves around rejecting the centrality of the working class.

Far from disappearing, the world’s waged workforce increased from 0.9 billion in 1991 to 1.7 billion in 2014. We say that the proletariat, the wage-labour class of people who, to live, must sell their labour-power, is the bearer of socialism. Why? Because it alone can resolve the contradiction within capitalism between private ownership and socialised production. And how? By establishing collective social control, democratic control, over the production processes that knit together vast social networks. The working class will do that because it needs to free itself from exploitation and social mismanagement and to develop the bulk of productive wealth. But what about the state of the labour movement? The long history of the working class, of its defeats, its declines, and its revivals, shows us what will happen in the future, though not of course in exact detail. It is sure and certain that the working class will revive. The working-class socialist movement will revive. Everything in history shows that it will. Why? Because capitalism can live only by exploiting the “labour force”.

DEMOCRACY

The third major objection revolves around democracy.

The book dissects the pseudo-democracy under capitalism, where tremendous economic powers and social-financial forces dominate the democratic discourse, elections, the shaping of opinion and their capture of legislators. But for Marxian socialists democracy is a central, all-conditioning and all-defining, principle and central value of socialism. We advocate consistent democracy in every avenue of life: democracy as far as possible within the boundaries of capitalism and its states, democracy as the answer to national and other forms of oppression, democracy within the bounds of the labour movement, democracy among the revolutionaries and collective democratic control as the socialist economic alternative.

HUMAN NATURE

The book confronts another widely raised objection to socialism, namely human nature.

If human beings are just animals — naked apes — then (so the argument goes) you can’t change human nature. Competition, individualism, selfishness, predatoryness — nourishes capitalism. Socialists do not deny or idealise human nature, or the facts of our biology, nor humanity’s place within the natural environment. But human beings are self-aware, self-controlling, self-shaping, self-shaping. We can aspire to a society governed by something higher than the dog-eat-dog morality that capitalism teaches.

Human nature is socially malleable and has all sorts of possibilities. The question is what a given society, or a given state, encourages to develop. Capitalist society prizes and rewards those who prey on other people. That is not, or not just, human nature. That is also nurture — what capitalist society makes of a human nature that also has vastly different possibilities which capitalism inhibits and stifles.

To those who believe that wealth and power are the only spur to action in humankind, socialists answer: what a miserably coarse and obtuse in places, politically incorrect, denatured picture of society drawn by the opponents of socialism (and a few who later became rogues) such as Luxemburg and also Engels, Paul Lafargue, August Bebel, Clara Zetkin, William Morris, Eugene Debs, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Max Shachtman, Hal Draper, Ernest Belfort Bax and Henry Hyndman. Albert Einstein the great scientist also makes the case for socialism.

The book is entertainingly written. It is coarse and obtuse in places, politically incorrect for some and profoundly jarring for others. But the vocabulary is rich, the metaphors illuminate and the results enlighten, whether you are a jaded ex-radical or a raw new-comer. The book is accessible but also demanding; it requires careful reading and willingness to learn. It breaks down complex arguments but demands the reader make themselves familiar with the rich tapestry of modern history.

Can socialism make sense? Not only does socialism make sense — it is an unavoidable imperative. Socialism is necessary for the majority of the world’s population to live well.

Socialism is essential for general human flourishing. Socialism is indispensable to preserve the planet we live on. Socialism is required for social and personal liberation. Socialism is necessary for the next stage of human evolution.
The attacks on disabled people are not over

Paula Peters from Disabled People Against Cuts spoke to Solidarity (in a personal capacity).

The government may have backed down over cuts to Personal Independence Payments (PIP, non-means-tested benefit), but the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Stephen Crabb, has already said more cuts are in the pipeline. There are now attacks on the rights and living conditions of disabled people from almost every direction.

- The cuts in benefit for new claimants on Employment Support Allowance (ESA), who are in the work-related activity group (WRAG) will be going ahead. This will be a £30 a week cut. From April 2017 nearly 500,000 will be hit by the ESA-WRAG cut.
- People who are being transferred over to Universal Credit from other benefits will have much lower claim rates, and will also be affected by this cut. This cut will mean ESA claimants getting the same amount of money as those on Jobseeker’s Allowance, down by £4.20 billion off the government’s welfare budget.
- PIP itself is a step backwards from what we had before [with the Disability Living Allowance]. Many claimants are losing entitlement to the higher rate mobility allowance, which enabled them to hire Motorbility cars. The loss of Motorbility cars is impacting on disabled people’s independence; many use their cars to get to work and without it travel becomes nigh impossible.
- The WRAG cut, which is going ahead, is a massive cut in care packages. Many claimants have lost their entitlement to care packages.

We asked him about the ESA cut and his reply was, “Why are you worried about the cut, it’s not happening until next year?” Some of these MPs don’t even know who they’re voting for! On the 18 March we forced Osborne and Goldsmith to abandon a photo shoot in north London and hide from our protest, so a portakabin for two hours. A few days later Iain Duncan Smith resigned.

So we feel after six years our protests are being heeded by the government. When Iain Duncan Smith the most hated man in Britain. The public are starting to wake up and say “this isn’t right.”

The new leadership of the Labour Party – Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell – have been a great support, and were before they were elected. DPAC broke with our tradition and supported Corbyn in his election for leader of the Labour Party. John McDonnell is going to announce DPAC’s September week of action at TUC Disabled Workers conference (19-20 May). It is important, that Labour party activists, trade unionists, and grass roots campaigners scrutinise what the Labour front bench talk about on Labour Party policy and have input into the shaping of policy. All of us must pile on the pressure for Labour to oppose the Tory austerity agenda. We want change, not more years of austerity. We have some interesting times ahead.

We have had a successful name and shame campaign against MPs who have voted for the cuts [fingers crossed] and are not prepared to remove the barriers to access. We are asking charities to remove these cut-voting MPs as patrons [FTP Tory dump], Zac Goldsmith was one of those MPs – he was forced out of Richmond AID.

On 17 March we went to Croydon when Goldsmiths was cut on the campaign trail. We asked him about the ESA cut and his reply was, “Why are you worried about the cut, it’s not happening until next year?” Some of these MPs don’t even know who they’re voting for!

At Workers’ Liberty’s annual conference in November 2015 we discussed and passed a document on disability and disabled peoples’ struggles. As a result of this we have committed ourselves to making our organisation, events and publications more accessible. We are now producing our newspaper in an audio format weekly, and are working on making other materials available in other formats. We are now producing our newspaper in an audio format weekly, and are working on making other materials available in other formats. We are now producing our newspaper in an audio format weekly, and are working on making other materials available in other formats. We are now producing our newspaper in an audio format weekly, and are working on making other materials available in other formats. We are now producing our newspaper in an audio format weekly, and are working on making other materials available in other formats.

Please get in touch if you wish to help with that work.

* Read the policy we passed at: bit.ly/dispolicy

Removing barriers for autistic workers

Cathy Nugent reviews Autism Equality in the Workplace: Removing barriers and challenging discrimination by Janine Booth.

This is not a book of advice for autistic people on how to adapt to work or how to socialise with colleagues. There are other books and resources for that.

This is a book, based on many interviews with people with autism, as well as the author’s own experiences, which says employers should remove barriers that autistic people face at work.

As Janine argues, “if we wait for employers to make their workplaces autism friendly voluntarily we will be waiting a long time — far longer than a fair society would expect anyone to wait for progress and equality.”

Not least because some autistic people need a good deal of support and employers just don’t do “support”!

Janine advocates a political goal — wider democratically-organised public ownership of industries and services, where equality and inclusion for all is at the heart of work organisation. But she also recognises we need to mobilise our labour movement to fight for good jobs and in the meantime as much equality as we possibly can.

In the meantime labour movements (and trade unions) need to understand what barriers autistic people face at work.

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Janine writes about the world of work that Janine writes about, was paired people. It is a guide to social action, to working together, that we will win the fight for disabled people’s rights.

Being forced to mimic emotional connection (doing “emotional labour”) is a great effort. For some of us this is okay. For many of us, whether we are autistic or not, it is not. Autistic people point out, it is unfair to ask people with autism to adapt into “masking” (e.g. by anxiously “practising” socialising; shorter strip lighting; shorter subway platforms; getting other people to relay information, as with banking and shopping). And, as Janine points out, it is often obvious that the place of work is creating problems and distress. It is a place of emotional pain.

Janine’s book is eye-opening, should be read by all trade unionists, and organisations for a future workers’ government and it is full of ideas for workplaces, things for unions to fight for now. This requires that trade unions have better, and a policy for accessibility to work for all disabled people as well as drives to organise the unorganised.

Many of the points she makes are not new — ideas here are: such as getting rid of strip lighting; shorter meetings; shorter platforms; written as well as spoken instructions; jargon-free information; banning “hot deskings”; ending supervisory bullying, micromanaging and performance management — are things that autistic and non-autistic workers can unite around.

At Workers’ Liberty’s annual conference in November 2015 we discussed and passed a document on disability and disabled peoples’ struggles. As a result of this we have committed ourselves to making our organisation, events and publications more accessible. We are now producing our newspaper in an audio format weekly, and are working on making other materials available in other formats. We are also publishing accessibility information for all our events and changing the venues we use.

Please get in touch if you wish to help with that work.

* Read the policy we passed at: bit.ly/dispolicy
Irish nationalism and the socialist republic

The fourth part of Michael Johnson’s series on the life and politics of James Connolly.

Building on the ideas of John Leslie (of the Independent Labour Party) in his 1897 pamphlet Erin’s Hope, Connolly claimed that the essence of the national question in Ireland was a battle over “fundamentally different ideas on the vital question of property in land”.

Between, on the one hand, a supposed Irish “primitive communism” and, on the other, an “alien socialist system” of private ownership.

Drawing on the contemporary anthropological works of Lewis Morgan, which had also influenced Friedrich Engels, Connolly argued that a form of “primitive communism” had survived in Ireland much longer than in other European countries, and was only destroyed by the British when the clans were dispersed after the break-up of the Kilkenny confederation in 1649.

As with Leslie, this view allowed Connolly to puncture the pretensions of the tepid Home Rulers, whose simple concentration on forms of government was portrayed as superfluous.

It also opened up the possibility of an alliance between socialists and radical nationalists. Socialists, Connolly wrote, could “join with the Irish patriot in his laudable expressions of admiration for the sagacity of his Celtic forefathers who foreshadowed in the democratic organisation of the Irish clan the more perfect organisation of the free society of the future.”

Conversely, due to the dual political and social character of the national question, Connolly argued that if “the national movement of our day is not merely to re-enact the old Norman Conquest and even the existence of Irish feudalism predominating before the Norman Conquest, but is a “living book”, in the sense Antonio Gramsci understood Machiavelli’s The Prince: “not a systematic treatment, but a “living book”, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a “myth.”

Connolly’s historical analysis was intended to destroy the myths of Irish middle-class Catholic history, reveal the class lines within the national movement, and forge a proletarian world-view and as a spur and a guide to action.

As Connolly’s approach, too, was a creative attempt to explore a more linear approach to social development than was found in most contemporary Marxism with its notions of pre-ordained “stages” of development through which all nations must pass. Analytically and politically, however, it had problems.

As David Howell has written, Marx held up the hope of Russia in the 1870s developing into communism on the basis of its peasantry, dependent on support from working-class revolutions in western Europe. Such communities did still exist in Russia (though, as Plekhanov and then Lenin were to argue, they were already dissolving into a capitalism), and their existence made Marx’s view plausible.

Connolly’s case for Ireland “involved no institutional inheritance — only a historical memory with a substantial accretion of myth.” Connolly himself admits this when he writes that the “clans are now more and could not be revived, even if it were desirable to do so, which is more than questionable, but the right of ownership still lives on.” Connolly’s view of Irish “primitive communism” is now discredited, with the demise of “primitive communism” and, on the other, the pre-ordination “stages” of development, which passed sees this perfection and development of machinery going more and more rapidly. We are left no choice but socialism or universal bankruptcy.

And while Connolly in the same period can be seen defending a more orthodox Marxist view that socialism is “the legitimate child of a long, drawn-out historical evolution, and its consummation will only be finally possible when that evolutionary process has attained to a suitable degree of development,” he sometimes argues another case for Ireland in his writings on nationalism.

As Andy Johnston, James Larragy and Edward McWilliams have pointed out, the specifically Irish socialism outlined in Erin’s Hope at times resembles “a strongly autarkic programme for an isolated national system of production.”

Moreover, there is a strong implication running throughout Connolly’s arguments on socialism and nationalism that, if legislative independence is an illusion, and a capitalist Ireland seemingly impossible, any true nationalist will logically develop socialist conclusions.

For example, when leading separatist nationalist Arthur Griffith backed an ISRP candidate in 1902, Connolly wrote optimistically that: “We have always maintained that every honest friend of freedom would sooner or later find themselves in accord with us. The support now shown proves this.

Yet Griffith was in no sense socialist. His vision was for an independent capitalist Ireland, not a socialist republic. Drawing on the work of the nineteenth century German professor Friedrich List, also a great political independence, Griffith advocated economic self-sufficiency protected by high tariffs to develop Irish industry.

When Connolly does criticise the revolutonary nationalist tradition, it is often on tactical questions, such as the commitment to conspiratorial methods above mass politics, rather than for their non-working-class basis.

Connolly’s catastrophic and dichotomous view of “socialism or universal bankruptcy” also neglected the growing conservative Catholic rural bourgeoisie which was consolidating itself in this period, as a result of the British Tory Land Acts, which provided loans for tenants to buy out the landlords.

As Henry Patterson wrote in The Politics of Illusion, this view “failed to anticipate the space which existed in Catholic Ireland for a nationalism that was not as obsessively bourgeois as that of the Irish Parliamentary Party and yet in no sense socialist — a space which the reinvivied Sinn Fein organization would fill in the afternoon of 1916… There would prove to be a space for a revolutionary nationalism with conservative social content.”

While Connolly’s radical excavation of Irish history was intended to build a working-class socialist movement, it was double-edged in that it did not sufficiently distinguish the working-class view from other forms of republicanism. It provided later raw material for a revived Irish populist in the form of left-republicanism, which sought to assimilate the working-class in the service of nationalist aims.

But this was in the future. Connolly’s schema for Ireland co-existed in his mind with a sharp working-class socialism and a warning that “no revolutionists can safely invite the co-operation of men or classes, whose ideals are not theirs, and whom, therefore, they may be compelled to fight at some future critical stage of the journey to freedom.”

“You may be pleased”, he wrote, “that the ideal of a Socialist Republic, implying, as it does, a complete political and economic revolution would be sure to alienate all our middle-class and aristocratic supporters, who would dread the loss of their property and privileges.”

What does this objection mean? That we must conciliate the privileged classes in Ireland…

“As a Socialist I am prepared to do all one can to make the Irish of Ireland realise her rightful heritage — independence; but if you ask me to abate one jot or tittle of the claims of social justice, in order to conciliate the privileged classes, then I must decline.”
Independent working-class representation in politics.

The capitalists’ control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth 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 must unite to struggle against capitalist power in the workplace and in wider society.

The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty wants 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 trade unions and the Labour Party to break with “social partnership” with the bosses and to militantly assert working-class interests.

In workplaces, trade unions, and Labour organisations; among students; in local campaigns; on the left and in wider political 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, toicket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
• Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
• A workers’ movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. For reproductive justice: free abortion on demand; the right to choose when and whether to have children. 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.
• 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!

Give power back to the members

LABOUR

Rhea Wolfson, who has replaced Ken Livingstone on the Centre-left Alliance slate for Labour’s National Executive (NEC), spoke to Solidarity.

I think the campaign is now going very well.

It started off with an unexpected torrent of abuse from fascists, which was very difficult emotionally, for me and my family. But that has calmed down, and we have seen huge amounts of support from my union, which helped. But apart from that and an attempted smear of me as someone not interested in winning elections, it has gone well.

I’m coming to the game late. I don’t have as many CLP nominations as most people. CLP nominations are very important, because they can inform people on who I am. They are a reality at the moment. On the Campaign for Socialism website, you can get model motions and notes to help you get nominations for me and the left slate through your CLP.

We also need money to run the campaign! I would like to run a campaign on the basis of lots of small donations from people who support the ideas I’m standing on.

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This vote is a vote for everyone in the Labour Party — so name recognition is very important.

If people want to spread the word through any medium, that recognition is very important. If people want to spread the word through any medium, that recognition is very important.

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School janitors step up strike

By Dale Street

Glasgow school janitors are on strike from 16 to 20 May as part of their ongoing dispute with Cordia — an arm’s length company of Glasgow City Council — over Working Context and Demands Payments (WCDP).

WCDP, worth between £500 and £1,000 a year, are paid to employees who undertake dirty duties, heavy lifting, and regular outside working. The janitors meet all the criteria, but Cordia is refusing to pay them WCDP.

This week’s strike follows on from earlier three-day strikes in March and April, and a boycott of the disputed duties which began in March. The janitors, all members of Unison, will be staging a demonstration outside the City Council and the Scottish Parliament, and also holding a teatime street rally in Glasgow.

Cordia’s response to the janitors’ campaign of industrial action has been to use non-union and non-janitors’ employees, and to pay them enhanced payments. According to Unison, the money spent by Cordia in an attempt to break the boycott and strikes is greater than the cost of awarding the janitors WCDP.

5,000 Unison members employed in Glasgow City Council’s Residential and Emergency Services and other departments are also currently being balloted on industrial action in response to plans to slash terms and conditions of employment. The ballot closes on 20 May.

In an attempt to undermine support for a “yes” vote, the Deputy Director of Social Work has issued a letter to staff wrongly claiming that Unison has agreed to the so-called “six-day” of public holidays.

1,500 GMB members are also being balloted on strike action to prevent imposition of the Council’s attacks on terms and conditions, which would see their pay cut by £1,500 a year.

The GMB ballot closes on 19 May. Glasgow City Council is Labour-controlled, and Scottish council elections are taking place next May.

Topshop cleaners protest across country

By Darren Bedford

Hundreds of trade unionists and other activists blocked London’s Oxford Street on Saturday 14 May, in demand justice for cleaning workers at Topshop.

Two cleaners, employed by contractor Britannia, have been suspended and sacked on spurious grounds after they joined the United Voices of the World cleaners union and began campaigning for living wages and other workplace rights. The demonstration, which saw banner drops and pickets at Topshop’s flagship stores, demanded their reinstatement, as well as real living wages for Topshop cleaners.

Topshop boss Sir Philip Green is one of the wealthiest capitalists in Britain, earning an estimated £1,000 a year, compared to the £6.70 per hour earned by those who keep his shops clean.

The demonstration was attended by Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell MP, who had earlier spoken at a meeting of the Hungry for Justice campaign, a Bakers, Food, and Allied Workers’ Union (BFAWU) initiative to win a £10/hour minimum wage, an end to zero-hours contracts, and union rights for workers in the fast food industry.

Delegates from Unite New Zealand, which has successfully campaigned for significant wage increases and the abolition of zero-hours contracts, also attended.

Strikes against Sheffield job losses

By Gemma Short

PCS members working at a Department of Business, Innovation and Skills site in Sheffield (the largest office), Warrington, Bristol and Darlington will strike on 19 May over plans to close the office and move work to London.

Workers voted by 97% in favour of strikes against the closures, which they argue will actually cost money as the government will need to recruit and train workers to do the equivalent jobs in the London office.

The plans have caused outrage at a time when the government claims it is trying to create a “northern powerhouse”.

In April a demonstration was held in Sheffield which condemned the plans as actually creating a “northern poorehouse”.

• Sign the petition: bit.ly/6p8isino with the hashtag #KeepSheffieldOpen

The Labour Group’s readiness to pass on funding cuts imposed by the SNP government in Holyrood and its willingness to turn a blind eye to the strike-breaking tactics of the Council’s arm’s length companies will cost it dear.

The main threat was the “take no position” view. This was not an active boycott or abstention argument, but one motivated by concerns about divisions among members such as “in and out” — reflecting a lack of confidence and political education.

FBU conference votes to remain in EU

By Jack Horner

FBU conference in Blackpool last weekend witnessed sharp debate over the European Union, with delegates eventually voting to remain after much wrangling.

FBU’s executive council proposed a statement to the conference calling for a vote to remain.

This argued that the consequences of leaving would be detrimental to firefighters: the working time directive is built into firefighters’ national pay and conditions, while retained firefighters have won gains as part-time workers in the EU, such as pensions, sick leave, holiday pay and other leave.

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary said it was not “our” referendum, but was taking place at the behest of wretched among the Tories, spurred on by UKIP. He said most of the current debate involved pro-business politicians debating how best to exploit workers, whether inside or outside the EU.

Wrack argued that a vote to remain must not be taken as an endorsement of the current EU, but “a recognition that the forces of labour are not in a position to replace it with something better”. He called for an independent labour movement approach, with no sharing of platforms or official campaigns. He condemned ex-TUC general secretary Brendan Barber for writing a joint letter with David Cameron supporting remain.

A Brexit motion from London moved by regional secretary Paul Embery received little support. Its supporters produced a terrible document before conference, which referred to “an explosion of cheap labour”. Numerous delegates stood up to defend migrants and to reject the false and xenophobic stereotyping of these workers.

The main threat was the “take no position” view. This was not an active boycott or abstention argument, but one motivated by concerns about divisions among members such as “in and out” — reflecting a lack of confidence and political education.

Southern strikes continue

By Ollie Moore

Members of the RMT union on Southern plan further strikes on Wednesday 18 May as part of the dispute over the extension of “Driver Only Operation”.

Southern management has consistently attempted to bully workers out of striking, threatening severe pay deductions and the removal of various benefits, including travel and parking permits. RMT has said it will pay strike benefit for 80% to all workers involved in the strikes, and is considering legal action against Southern.

The union also plans a demonstration outside a meeting of railway bosses at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster on the morning of Wednesday 18.
TORIES THREATEN HUMAN RIGHTS

By Colin Foster

The Queen’s Speech on 18 May — the government’s announcement of its plans for new laws — is likely to include the Tories’ implementation of their Education White Paper and replacing the Human Rights Act.

The Tories stated their thinking on the Human Rights Act as far back as 2005: “to liberate the nation from the...politically correct regime ushered in by Labour’s enthusiastic adoption of human rights legislation”.

The Human Rights Act, legislated in 1998 by the Labour government, wrote the European Convention on Human Rights into British law. It enabled people to bring cases citing that convention in British courts, including challenges to government regulations and decrees.

The European Convention on Human Rights dates from 1950, and was largely a British initiative, implemented through the Council of Europe (which had ten member states when founded in 1949 — before the EU or its predecessors — and now includes almost all European states).

Before 1998, British citizens could bring legal cases under the Convention, but only by laboriously going through the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Home Secretary Theresa May has said that Britain should not only repeal the Human Rights Act, but quit the Convention. The official Tory policy is that they will write the 1950 text of the Convention into British law; reject all the subsequent extensions-through-interpretation by the European Court; install “a threshold below which Convention rights will not be engaged” so as to invalidate “trivial cases”; and provide that “Britain’s courts will no longer be required to take into account rulings from the Court in Strasbourg”.

Aware that “under the terms of the current treaty it will remain open to individuals to take the UK to the Strasbourg Court claiming a breach of their Convention rights, and resultant judgments of the Court will be seen to be binding on the UK as a treaty obligation”, they will “seek agreement” from the Council of Europe to modify that, and, if they don’t get that, quit the Convention. The gist is clear: the Tories will make it harder to claim human rights, and make the remaining rights ones which can be changed at any time by a parliamentary majority.

An “Extremism Bill” is also promised which will provide for anyone with “extremist views” — defined as something like “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values”, or what the government deems “British values”, anyway — to be banned, for example, from working in schools.

David Anderson QC, the official reviewer of anti-terrorist legislation, has already (in a September 2015 report) warned that this means making it “legitimate for the state to scrutinise (and the citizen to inform upon) the exercise of core democratic freedoms by large numbers of law-abiding people”.

ACADEMIES

The Tories have drawn back from a blanket rule that all schools must become “academies” by a certain date, but plan to go on with pressure to make schools academies and forcibly to intervene in local authorities deemed to be “failing”.

National terms and conditions for teachers, from which academies and free schools are already exempt, will be shredded. Recognised teacher qualifications will be abolished to be replaced by head teachers’ say-so.

Also likely in the Queen’s Speech is a Higher Education Bill which will lift the ceiling on university tuition fees and, at the other end of the “market”, make it easier for cut-price universities on the US model to award degrees.

A new regime for prisons will allow “failing jails” to be taken over on the model of “academy schools”.

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