

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



Volume 3 No 196 9 March 2011 30p/80p

For a workers' government

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Picture: [reportdigital.co.uk/Phil Wolmuth](http://reportdigital.co.uk/Phil%20Wolmuth)

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Make 26 March springboard for fightback

What is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?

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

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

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

We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses.

Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

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

We stand for:

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

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Protests in North Korea

By Dan Angell

According to Asian news agencies, small scale demonstrations have sprung up in parts of North Korea.

Although the details of these protests are not clear and there is little suggestion that they amount to a determination to fight for immediate regime change, they are potentially highly significant.

The lack of food, electricity and basic utilities are the most likely reason for the demonstrations. Challenging the regime directly is too dangerous, and most North Koreans simply don't have enough knowledge on the possible "alternatives".

It is also unlikely that these protests have been directly influenced by the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. The state controlled media allows no news from the outside world. There simply isn't enough flow of information for citizens to draw influence from such events.

Some sources suggest the apparent succession of power from Kim Jong-il to his youngest son Kim Jong-un is unnerving the severely oppressed and hungry population. One internet source claims that North Koreans regard Kim Jong-un as "bloodthirsty and mad".

Further, "almost everyone thinks he was behind the military attacks against ROKS Cheonan and an island under South Korean control, which led to restrictions on humanitarian aid from the South. This has further worsened standards of living in the North. North Koreans are ready to do just about anything to stop the succession."

South Korean activists are reported to be planning the sending of videos of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia to North Korean citizens.

Although an unsuccessful "propaganda war" has existed between the two Koreas for several decades, providing video evidence of popular uprisings to discontented North Koreans may assist in spreading the notion of democracy.

Kim Jong-un

AFL-CIO calls action on 4 April

In Wisconsin, the movement against the anti-union Walker Bill is entering a new phase.

Protestors have been cleared out of the Capitol building, which they had been occupying since 15 February. But trade unions and other grassroots campaigners against the bill are still rallying and organising actions and demonstrations outside the Capitol building; and fourteen Democratic senators are still in hiding in Illinois, thereby making it constitutionally impossible for the Wisconsin state senate to pass the Bill into law. Meanwhile, similar bills are being passed in other states — there are ongoing, large protests against a Walker-style anti-union bill in Ohio, and state senators in Indiana have copied the Wisconsin 14 and fled the state.

Traven Leyshon, an American labour activist, spoke to *Solidarity* about what's at stake in this new phase of the fight.

The AFL-CIO union federation had a national conference call on 7 March with leaders of AFL-CIO locals. The attitude displayed was very contradictory.

AFL-CIO national president Trumke said: "this is really our moment right now. How do we take the momentum and sustain it?" He said that events in Madison have breathed new life into the labour movement.

That's true, and it's not just in the labour movement, people beyond it are looking to the trade unions — college and high school students and progressive organisations are demonstrating. The labour movement is the centre of people's attention right now.

STRATEGY

But what's the strategy to win? There isn't a coherent one. The unstated strategy is an electoralist strategy — organising for the elections in 2012.

In the interim we'll be pursuing recalls of eight of the Wisconsin Republican senators and if we are suc-

cessful we'll be able to reverse the worst parts of the bill. And in similar states like Ohio where similar anti-collective bargaining bills are being passed, we'll deal with that by getting a referendum which we will perhaps win.

It's an electoralist strategy which I think will be very demoralising and demobilising.

At the same time there is a lot of activity in Madison. On 3 March the National Nurses United union organised a march against workers making any concessions, with 7,000 people on it. On 5 March there were 50,000 at two rallies that occurred in the same place. The larger one was organised by a grassroots coalition in Madison and the smaller was organised by the AFL-CIO national leadership.

The reason that there were two rallies was that the AFL-CIO leadership were worried that speakers at the locally-organised grassroots demo would be off-message and too left-wing. But the demonstration was inspiring. It had a militant message with a good speech by Michael Moore.

The Wisconsin AFL-CIO has called for a statewide mobilisation on 12 March. It will not include official strikes, though there might be unofficial walkouts, as there previously have been with teachers. The feeling in Madison is still very strong.

4 April is the next really big step in the national AFL-CIO campaign, calling a day of action across the country, looking to students and so on for broad support.

I think we are at a crossroads. There are two different tendencies in the

workers' movement. The leadership are looking towards closer links with the Democrats and rebuilding their institutional power.

And then there is a very inspiring level of activity at the rank-and-file level, exemplified by the call for to educate members in Wisconsin about the role of a general strike.

TWO PATHS

The attacks can be stopped either way but it really matters which way.

The lessons of a victory, if it's won by the Democratic Party in the legislature with the support of the union officials, will be that workers need to rely on the Democratic Party to defend themselves, that is to keep a dependent relationship to a political party which is dominated by big business.

On the other hand, the workers in Ohio and Wisconsin and other states are engaged in a battle the likes of which we haven't seen in 35 years, and if we win through our economic and workplace power and through civil disobedience, possibly including political strikes, then the lessons of such an experience would be that workers do have power: it would put us on a path of political independence and rebuilding a working-class movement in this country.

There are these two alternative paths and the reality is of course a hybrid. There are going to be national demonstrations called by the national unions, there is going to be local action including workplace action in some case supported by national unions and then there's going to be electoral activity. That's why I think we're at a crossroads.

Police should have right to strike

By Colin Foster
A government review has recommended that police overtime and other payments above basic wages be cut, and that 28,000 jobs be cut from police and back-up staff.

Paul McKeever, chair of the Police Federation, reckons that "with the two-year pay freeze and a likely increase in pension

contributions... police officers are likely to suffer a 15-20% reduction in the value of their pay".

Although last October the Government spoke of giving police the right to strike, and in 2008 the Police Federation decided by a large ballot majority to demand the right to strike, at present the cops have no such right.

Police strikes were banned in 1919, after a po-

lice strike in 1918-19 when the Government suspected strikers of sympathising with other striking workers in the left-wing mood of the time.

The police are not ordinary workers. But if they start moving for industrial action, the labour movement should back them on a democratic basis as we backed the prison officers' strikes in 2007.

He's out for their jobs

NHS: back to 1930s?

By Gerry Bates

Mark Porter, chair of the hospital consultants' committee of the British Medical Association, has warned that: "Very deliberately, the government wishes to turn back the clock to the 1930s and 1940s, when there were private, charitable, and cooperative providers of healthcare."

"But the system failed to provide comprehensive and universal service... That's why health was nationalised. But they're proposing to go back to the days before the NHS".

Already the Thatcher and Blair governments have damaged the Health Service by bringing more and more market economics into it. This cabinet of millionaires plans to make a drastic and maybe decisive further step: all NHS hospitals will become units in a market economy, competing with each other and with private companies for contracts with GP consortia.

That disrupts the health service because private firms will be able to destabilise NHS hospitals by outbidding them on easy-to-treat conditions, and leave them as a patchy and "increasingly tattered safety-net" for patients with difficult, long-term, but common illnesses like dia-

betes and heart problems.

At the other "end of the market", the Government's plans will encourage the rise of luxury provision for rich people who'll pay extra. There will be "Fortnum and Mason" health care for some and "Lidl" health care for others.

The Government says its plans are about "choice" and efficiency. That is a lie. The plans are about profit openings for private health firms, and cutting public spending.

Spending on the Health Service, as on all public services, is being cut back to cover the costs of the slump created by the bankers' crisis of 2008, and the huge taxpayer subsidies given to banks then to bail them out and stop the crisis becoming a full-scale collapse.

The banks got £11,000 billion then — £18,000 for each child, woman, and man in the UK — in buy-outs, loans, and guarantees. Now the banks are making profits again, and paying big bonuses, maybe £7 billion in the current round, to the highest-paid bankers. And the Government is making cuts, huge in relation to the services being cut, but modest sums in relation to the bankers' wealth, to balance the books.

Porter's warning, on 6

March, reflects a wider alarm among doctors. On 17 February, a London meeting of the usually very conservative BMA voted to end a policy of "critical engagement" with the Government and moved to outright opposition.

It called for poll of BMA members on industrial action to stop the Government's Health and Social Care Bill.

The unions, and especially the unions organising most health service workers, Unison and Unite, should catch up with the BMA.

In the labour movement, even in activist anti-cuts committees, the planned Health Service cuts and changes have been overshadowed by the faster and more straightforward cuts in local government and the civil service, and the changes in public sector pensions.

But the health service is, directly, a matter of life and death for us all. We all get old. We all get ill.

At last the unions have begun to move against the cuts, calling a demonstration in London on 26 March. Workers' Liberty and other activists will organise to make 26 March a springboard for industrial action to stop the cuts, and not just an exercise in letting off steam.

should take in consideration a child's race, ethnicity, cultural background. Well, shock horror!

All statistics show that the most important factor in a child's adoption process is their age. Once a child gets past a certain age their chances of being adopted diminish. That happens disproportionately to children who are from a black, Asian or dual heritage backgrounds.

But this is not the only aspect of the problem worth talking about.

Our social services system is literally cracking under the strain. At the same time as the government scraps "all children

matter" as policy (and to be clear, only some children matter) they are cutting funding, staff, children's services, training for foster carers etc.

There used to be voluntary schemes which supported white parents adopting non-white children with information, training and wider adoptive family networks so children would have black family and role models in their lives. All this went long before the current round of cuts we're facing.

But none of the above is the problem apparently. It's all about social workers being too politically correct.

Imam faces death threats for believing in evolution

By Sacha Ismail

Usama Hasan, an imam at the Tawhid mosque in Leyton, East London, has been hounded and threatened with death for stating that he believes in the theory of evolution, and that Muslim women are not obliged to wear the hijab.

In his 20s Hasan, who is now 39, was a radical Wahhabi (a follower of the branch of Islam which is the state religion of the Saudi autocracy), devoted to supporting various international jihadist causes. He later renounced these views and became an opponent of radical Islamism, making him a prominent Islamist target.

After Islamists disrupted his prayers and lectures and distributed a leaflet calling for his murder, right-wingers on the mosque's trustee board attempted to suspend Hasan. A statement from the mosque's secretary, Mohammad Sethi, claiming Hasan had been suspended was countered by an official statement from the imam's father and mosque chairman Suhaib Hasan condemning this "faction of trustees" and those who had disrupted his son's talks and threatened his life. The conflict in the mosque seems to have ended in a compromise on a "middle" position — and a worrying one.

On 4 March, Usama Hasan issued a "clarification and retraction" in which he stated:

"1. I regret and retract some of my statements in the past about the theory of evolution, especially the inflammatory ones.

"2. I do not believe that Adam, peace be upon him, had parents.

"3. I seek Allah's forgiveness for my mistakes and apologise to others for any offence caused."

The statement also attacked his attackers' "cow-

ardly and fraudulent campaign spreading lies and slander" and "mediaevalist, hair-splitting theological and jurisprudential discussions whilst remaining silent about... incitement to murder".

Nonetheless, it was clearly a retreat under huge pressure. Hasan was quoted in the *Evening Standard* saying that Islam is "not ready" for a debate about evolution. He has stopped leading prayers and acquired security for his family home, saying he is going to "have to live with extra cautions for the rest of [his] life".

It is obvious why the left has remained silent about this outrage against free thought and free speech, with comment left to 'liberal' pro-establishment organisations and blogs like the Quilliam Foundation and Harry's Place. Many socialists bizarrely see Islamism as progressive and criticism of it as Islamophobic.

EXTREMISM

The question of how we understand Islamism is a crucial one here.

Under New Labour, after 9/11 and 7/7, policy became oriented to driving a wedge between terrorists and "non-violent extremism". The Preventing Violent Extremism (Prevent) initiative began to distribute large amounts of money through local authorities to mainly Muslim groups. This is part of a more general shift towards allowing and funding specifically 'faith-based' organisations to deliver services.

A variety of forces on the left have criticised Prevent for being designed to spy on Muslim communities: "a major part of the Prevent programme is the embedding of counter-

terrorism police officers within the delivery of other local services. The primary motive for this is to facilitate the gathering of intelligence on Muslim

communities" (Arun Kundnani, Institute of Race Relations). Organisations have been denied access to funds unless they sign up to the government's 'counter-terrorism policing agenda'. These criticisms are entirely correct, but in many cases they miss another equally important aspect of the problem.

Under Prevent, Government support and funding has gone to organisations which, though they may oppose extreme-Islamist violence, are close to radical Islamism in their reactionary politics. As Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters puts it: "So called moderate religious groups may be moderate when it comes to bombing the streets of Britain but they are certainly not moderate when it comes to [for instance] women". Even in 'moderate' cases, moderate does not equal progressive.

The legitimisation of broadly Islamist views has created a climate radical variants (including violent ones) can flourish and gain ground, and reactionary forces can impose their views as hegemonic. Behind the local campaign against Usama Hasan was a well-organised international network of far-right Islamist clerics and organisations. With the help of Saleem Begg, a Wahhabi preacher partly based in Lewisham, Hasan's enemies in Leyton elicited and used fatwas (religious rulings) against him from Islamist clerics in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. One of the Saudis, Salih al-Sadhlani, has been courted by the Home Office in the belief that he can aid the fight against terrorism.

We are now in a situation in which a relatively conservative religious figure like Usama Hasan can be forced into retractions and withdrawal from leading prayers for daring to contradict the Islamist ultras.

Secularists and socialists in mainly Muslim communities are, of course, in a far worse position.

- *The religious lobby and women's rights*, by Rahila Gupta of Southall Black Sisters: bit.ly/ihAoPe
- Quilliam Foundation briefing paper with useful background information: bit.ly/exmM3I

Usama Hasan

Murdoch worse, the others bad

Press Watch

By Pat Murphy

Rupert Murdoch has won his bid to increase News International's share of BSkyB from 39% to 61%. An alliance of media organisations including the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Mirror* and BT had demanded the bid be referred to the Competition Commission.

Labour had said they wanted that too. As did the ex-Media and Culture Secretary, Vince Cable. Even Tory James Hunt, who replaced Cable in that post, was promising to refer the decision right up to the last minute.

Despite all this, Hunt permitted the takeover in return for a promise by News International to let go of the loss-making Sky News for at least 10 years. Murdoch gets his own way — again.

Does it matter that Murdoch, as opposed to any other corporate billionaire, owns yet another huge media outlet? Yes. Murdoch will now own 40% of the UK newspaper market and have around 10 million subscribers to his TV channels in the UK and Ireland. His media networks are consistently right-wing, anti-working class, and anti-labour movement.

Whether it is the *Sun* and *News of the World*, or the more upmarket *Times* and *Sunday Times*, Murdoch has both ends of the market covered, each with their own bespoke mix of celebrity gossip and lefty-bashing.

Murdoch's organisation also represents a particularly aggressive model of media ownership born in the Thatcher era, which created the material conditions for his triumph — anti-union laws, mass unemployment, deregulation. He is now acting as cheerleader-in-chief for the most right-wing government since the Second World War.

Key turning points in the struggle between the organised labour movement and the bosses during that period were marked by the symbiotic relationship between the government and News International — the miners' strike, the Wapping dispute and the against-the-odds Tory election victory in 1992 ("It was the *Sun* wot won it").

However some of the reaction to Murdoch's latest expansion serves only to mislead and miseducate our movement.

Left Labour MP John McDonnell, for example, urged Jeremy Hunt to go ahead with referring the deal to the Com-

Uncovering and presenting the whole truth is the only antidote to the likes of Murdoch

petition Commission because "nobody believes these undertakings agreed to by Murdoch will be adhered to in the long term. Many people will think we have reached a new low in British politics when the Conservative Party is backed by Rupert Murdoch before the election and then delivers this deal within months of being elected."

In fact there is no "new low". This is just another demonstration of the supine nature of the institutions which are supposed to protect press freedom and democracy.

When Murdoch wanted to buy the *Times* and *Sunday Times* in 1979, it was also expected to be referred to competition bodies. He got out of that by claiming that the two papers were not going concerns and delaying his takeover would risk them going out of business.

In 1990, when he proposed to merge his Sky company with British Satellite Broadcasting (BSB) to create BSkyB, he used the exact same argument — both were loss-making companies.

A socialist response should not be to line up with the other media barons to argue for a "level playing field". Nor should we pretend that there is a democratic media equilibrium which nasty Rupert (often demonised as "foreign") is spoiling. With the exception of the unique way in which the BBC is run, all the British mass media is in the hands of oligarchs or major corporations.

The political differences between them are marginal in the great scheme of things. Of the non-Murdoch papers two of the tabloids, *Star* and *Express*, are owned by Richard

Desmond's United Newspaper Group; one, the *Mail*, is owned by the Northcliffe Group, and one by the Mirror Group. All companies own local and regional papers and most have huge shares in TV and radio stations too. With the occasional exception of the *Mirror* they are uniformly and consistently hostile to unions, socialist ideas of any kind and, above all, strikes.

When it comes to trade unions and industrial action the more serious broadsheet papers are worse. None of them, not the *Guardian* and not the *Independent*, troubles its conscience long before denouncing striking workers.

Socialists are often accused of moaning and making excuses when we blame the "meejah" for our defeats and failure of our ideas to triumph, but the power this monochrome media control gives to the ruling class and their system is immense. We all need a source of news and information to make sense of the world and it takes great determination and political confidence to filter out of that news and information the prejudice and assumptions which are transmitted by the sources we have to rely on.

Combating this power and influence is an immense job. It is one of the reasons socialists are so committed to sustaining our own newspapers, websites and publications. It is why we give huge importance to political education and independent reading and the habits of debate and criticism.

And of course struggle at whatever level can transform superficial thinking overnight. Whether it is tabloid homophobia, and racism challenged by black and lesbian and gay miners' support groups in 1984, or the entire city of Liverpool turning away from the *Sun* after the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, the hold of the press on working class consciousness can be rapidly undermined — but it is still necessary to work hard at drawing out the lessons and spreading the message.

We cannot hope to compete with the resources and financial power of multinational capital, but we can develop and nourish critical minds and a sceptical, questioning culture. Lenin once said of the great liberal paper in Britain, the *Guardian*, that it "tells the truth 80% of the time all the better to lie for the other 20%".

Being a socialist does not mean rejecting all information in the bourgeois media, but it does mean taking responsibility for thinking, interpreting and making sense of that information — sorting out and explaining what are the facts as opposed to the lies and half-lies. One of the truths we have to communicate, unfortunately, is that we would have a bosses' press and media with or without Rupert Murdoch.

Letters

Make MPs accountable

Paul Hampton (*Solidarity* 194) seems (it is not totally clear) to oppose any constituency link when electing MPs on the grounds that it produces a result that is not exactly proportional to the votes cast for each party nationally.

That is wrong. Abolition of constituencies would mean that MPs would just be chosen from national party lists, putting more power into the hands of central party bureaucracies (and we already have some idea of what that means in the Labour Party!). It also removes any accountability of MPs to their electorate or to local party members. Finally, it robs constituents of anyone who directly represents them in parliament and who can be put under pressure by campaigning.

In short, it is fundamentally undemocratic. There are ways to combine a generally proportional result with a constituency system as the recent elections in Ireland show. Larger multi-member constituencies is one; combining a party list with a constituency system is another. Democracy, not pure proportionality, should be our aim in any reform of the electoral system.

Bruce Robinson, Manchester

Leave sexual morality out of it

Hugh Edwards (*Solidarity* 3-194) criticises Silvio Berlusconi's appointment of "prostitutes" to public office. It is not a term that I favour: many feminists now prefer to say "sex workers", reflecting that the women in question are workers, and we should relate to them as such.

More broadly, in deciding an attitude towards Berlusconi's current travails, two comparisons are instructive. First, yes, Berlusconi has been thoroughly sexist in his approach to ministerial selections. But for many years the British Conservative Party, albeit in a different way, was also notoriously sexist in its selection of MPs (it has better window-dressing now, but I doubt this has changed things very much).

This was never a major point on which to attack the Tories: by comparison to the impact of their government on working-class women it was rather marginal. Berlusconi's behaviour is more outrageous, but I do not think the difference is fundamental: in both cases, not surprisingly, right-wing parties are sexist in their parliamentary selections. Second, in relation to Berlusconi's personal life, we might consider the sorry case of Tommy Sheridan.

When Sheridan was attacked by the right-wing press for going to sex clubs, he might have said "no comment". Or he might — better, in my view — have said "yes, and why not?" in a refreshing rejection of sexual convention. But if we reject criticisms of Sheridan on the basis of his private life, we must reject similar criticisms of Berlusconi. One might argue that Berlusconi is alleged to have paid for sex, Sheridan was not, and therein lies the difference. But that argument stands only if one has a particular objection to sex for money, an objection that in a money-driven capitalist society cannot be other than moralistic.

I agree with Hugh that Italian society is deeply sexist, but to tackle that sexism we need to disentangle the distinct issues of sexual morality and gender equality.

Cath Fletcher, Florence

Action doesn't "just happen"

On 2 March Hackney council passed its budget. As in other boroughs local activists demonstrated against the meeting. The road outside the town hall was blockaded and activists inside chanted slogans at councillors, disrupting the meeting at one point, before agreeing to let it continue. I was glad to be there.

That said, more would have been possible if Hackney Alliance activists had developed a plan to disrupt the meet-

ing. We have since learned that the Lambeth Town Hall occupation was the product of a lot of preparation (see *Solidarity* 195). In Hackney, and I'm sure elsewhere, there is a feeling that direct action "just happens", that crowds act completely spontaneously to carry out very radical tactics. This is simply not true.

Security was very tight at the Hackney budget meeting, but it was not beyond the capability of the Hackney Alliance to organise chanting inside that would have halted the meeting a second time. This might have allowed us to at least stage an occupation of the public gallery and offered a greater spectacle of resistance to the council and local people. It could have all gone wrong, of course, but better preparation would have given us more chances.

Dan Rawnsley, Hackney

Free the fascist, grab the Jew?

Last week I was arrested and charged for confronting a group of people who were sieg-heiling and using racist language towards a group of friends and anti-cuts students. Their behaviour included telling an Asian and a mixed-race woman to "look in the mirror to see how inferior you are".

The police turned up at the altercation. They were uninterested in the racism and abuse, and instead pushed a Jewish woman in our group who was remonstrating with the police about doing nothing.

The man responsible for most of the abuse was told to "move along".

I raised my voice in a futile attempt to make the cops aware that they had allowed a man to get away with racially abusing Jewish and black people. I was then cuffed and man-handled to the front of a police van, and my head was repeatedly hit against the bonnet. I was taken to a police station overnight and hit with an £80 drunk-and-disorderly fine in the morning.

In the words of one of the anti-cuts people: "it's rare in western Europe that someone Nazi salutes down a street, and the Jew he was doing it to is the one arrested."

Chris Marks, Hull

Fighting after 26 March

The labour movement is facing the most generalised attack on the working class in 20 years. Ministers and officials are routinely monitoring the union response and actively planning to defeat any resistance. If the unions do not respond with deep and extensive industrial action and a political alternative, then wages will be slashed, and everyone's "social wage" of public services and benefits will be hollowed out and recast as a private-sector, parasitic, business opportunity.

Without industrial action and a political alternative, hundreds of thousands of jobs will be lost.

Unions will be hugely weakened. A wave of cutting union facility time or even union derecognition may follow across the public sector. The government also signals that it will meet a half-hearted union response with new anti-strike laws.

Union leaders speak vaguely of big mobilisations to come (sometime) whilst signalling their unwillingness to organise their members to fight now. This reinforces the lack of confidence which understandably exists in many areas; undermines the more confident groups of workers; and blocks struggle on issues where it is impossible, or difficult, to fight workplace-by-workplace (pensions, and sometimes jobs too).

Ministers have picked up on the underlying message, and so have trade union members and activists — who are left isolated, too often struggling to deal with the onslaught in their workplace through negotiating voluntary redundancies rather than through a generalised resistance to job loss, pay cuts, and the slashing of public services.

Politically, Unison's strategy of campaigning to split the coalition government and waiting for a return of a friendly Miliband-led Labour government will not save our jobs and services. We need industrial action to beat back the government and force the Labour leadership to change course rather than plan their milder version of the cuts.

SLOW

All the unions have been slow in responding. One of the major attacks on public sector pensions (indexing pensions to CPI rather than RPI) was legislated almost a year ago and goes into effect from April 2011; and yet the union leaders still talk of waiting to see whether they can negotiate something acceptable with the Government and then considering industrial action as a "last resort".

The PCS leaders (around the Socialist Party) plans to hook cross-union action on the pensions attack, while simultaneously claiming that PCS cannot defeat the Government alone, as if there can be no gain short of full surrender by the Government. In effect, they are waiting on a Unison leadership in which they themselves have no confidence.

Meanwhile, they leave the fight on the big and quick job cuts in the civil service down to workers fighting alone in isolated pockets - while telling them that on that issue, too, the whole PCS alone could not defeat the Government. The effect can only to push isolated reps into trying to deal with the crisis by negotiating voluntary redundancies.

Unison has numerous groups of workers keen to fight on the job and service cuts they face now. But the union officials are blocking or delaying ballots for them. Where the officials concede ballots, they do nothing to boost, publicise, or generalise the local action.

On pensions, despite the PCS leaders' perspective, there is no campaign in Unison at all. (A much bigger proportion of workers in local government than in the civil service have opted out of the pension scheme).

NUT, like PCS, focuses on pensions, but again in a mode of waiting for other unions to be ready. The leaders have only just now started talking to their members about action beyond "emailing your MP", and very tentatively. The leadership supports local fights for jobs and services, as at Rawmarsh School and in Tower Hamlets, but makes no effort to boost, publicise, and generalise them.

NOW

Activists across the public-sector unions need to develop a common and coherent policy, designed to break through all the diverse forms of bureaucratic inertia, evasion, or obstruction.

We demand that the unions start the fight back now! There are seven million trade unions and many more to recruit if the unions show leadership. We can win!

- Establish cross-union committees in every town, city and region. In a few cases already, pressure from active local



Anti-cuts demonstration at Lambeth Town Hall, 23 February 2011. Picture: Peter Marshall

anti-cuts committees has pushed local government unions into campaigning where otherwise they would have responded to cuts just by quietly negotiating damage-limitation. Build towards cross-union action to defeat a cross-union class attack by the Tories. Demand that the union leaders plan to win rather than sabre-rattle to win token concessions.

- Place jobs, services, anti-privatisation, at the heart of action, whilst also resisting attacks on pensions and pay. The confidence and consciousness of us all, members and reps, will change in action. Look to the far more dangerous circumstances of the Middle East and North Africa if you do not believe that resistance breeds resistance: a heroic example to us all.

- Do not wait on the "slowest boat." The fight for generalised action must not be an excuse for failing to mobilise national unions in defence of members. The Unison leadership will move to the extent that pressure from below builds on them — and that pressure will increase enormously if other unions begin to take action.

- Campaign for cross-union action, but fight for each union to take the necessary action to defend its members in national union action. Even if there is cross-union action that will need to be supplemented by rolling or continuous action in different sectors, and that action will build the confidence and the demand for further coordinated action.

LEVIES

- **Place the unions on a war footing! Collect membership levies to fund selective action or hardship funds; plan national action; regional action; rolling strikes; selective action in areas where it will have most impact — whatever is right in a particular industry or sector, whatever it takes to win.**

The Government and bosses are planning to win. We must do likewise. It is good that the UCU has gone ahead and organised for a one-day protest strike in the run-up to 26 March. But a single one-day strike, or even a sporadic series of one-day strikes, without follow-up, geared only to a hope that they will get some negotiations going, is a recipe for demoralisation as the bosses sit the strikes out and pass on the redundancy notices.

- Rebuild the unions! Union density is nowhere near as high as it needs to be in even the unionised areas. All experience shows that people join unions when they appear relevant to their jobs and living standards, not when they offer the cheapest commercial services. Rank and file committees, Trades Councils, cross union committees must spread

out and recruit as a major priority. Force the union leaderships to launch a mass drive to rebuild.

- The foundation-stone of union democracy and union mobilisation is timely and honest information. Demand that union leaders distribute clear information to members about the bosses' plans and help union branches to exchange information between themselves (instead of blocking that information-flow between branches, as happens in Unison). Demand they boost, publicise, and celebrate local disputes. Demand the union leaders give members honest information about what they plan to do, instead of appealing vaguely for them to "support the union campaign" and hinting at action in an indefinite future.

- Fight wherever we can, and spread the action! Do not use the failure of the national unions to fight as a reason for not fighting sectorally or locally. If members feel unable to resist in isolation, then criticise the national leaderships and fight for an alternative leadership, but do not assume that the lack of confidence is fixed in stone.

- Fight for an accountable leadership as part of the fight to win: The rank and file to be at the heart of the disputes and the campaigns. Regular workplace meetings to discuss the effects of the attacks and the necessary response. Elect strike committees and put decisions in the hands of striking workers and their delegates. Democratise the unions. Officials and branch officers should be accountable to members.

- Link our struggles. Unity should not be used as an excuse to wait until others take action. Organising solidarity and generalising our struggles will make us stronger.

- Set up democratic anti-cuts committees everywhere, with delegates from trade unions, community groups, student groups, and local Labour Parties. Get them out on the streets and the doorsteps, building a movement that will push the union leaders into action.

- Fight for a labour movement political answer to the crisis. Demand that Labour councils defy the Tory /Lib-Dem cuts, and that Labour councillors support our campaigns and pledge to continue with this after the May local elections. Mobilise local unions and working-class communities to demand the restoration of money for local services taken away by central government. Demand the Labour Party leaders support the resistance. Demand that Labour commit itself to repeal the anti-union laws, and to restore cuts made by the Tories, when we get this coalition government out.

Fight for a workers' government, democratically accountable to the labour movement and implementing a workers' plan for the crisis.

“My lifelong dream has come true”

Extracts from an interview with Kamal Abou Aita, President of the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETA), the first independent union in Egypt, established in 2009*

How did you feel during the initial days of the revolution?

I had a feeling of indescribable joy at seeing my lifelong dream coming true. To see Egyptians taking to the streets en masse, it was a moment of incredible joy.

How do you explain such a massive mobilisation within such a short space of time?

The young people managed to mobilise huge numbers of people. At the same time, since 2006, workers had started strike movements across the country, which prepared the ground for the revolution. It is through these strikes that they learnt to confront their fears, to dare to demonstrate in the streets and to organise themselves.

What were the main stages in the battle, leading to the formation of RETA?

In 1977, from 17 to 19 January, the massive popular uprising against the price of bread and other basic staples was a key moment. In 1977, only the government-controlled union federation ETUF was authorised, and creating a new union was impossible.

In 2007, we took a first step, by organising a group of workers and calling a strike. Over 50,000 workers took part. We set up 29 strike committees in each governorate and a coordinating committee in Cairo.

We were the first public sector employees in history to hold a strike outside the workplace, and we marched to the parliament building. The Finance Ministry finally gave in to our demands and we secured pay rises and better promotion opportunities.

We held discussions with the general and local strike committees, and they all agreed to become trade unions, in all the regions.

The ETUF, which had called on the Finance Minister to ignore our demands, went on, in 2009, to file a complaint against our union, accusing it of being illegal. Our office was closed down and I was arrested. I put up my own defence, for hours, evoking the right guaranteed by the Constitution to freely establish a union, in compliance with the ILO Convention on freedom of association ratified by Egypt. The judge dropped the case against me.

The ETUF leaders, who are part of the NDP (Mubarak's party), along with members of parliament, did everything in their power to force the workers to leave RETA. Some were transferred, demoted or had their wages cut as a reprisal. The ETUF also set up a competing union in our sector, where it did not have one, in complete breach of the law. In spite of all these difficulties, RETA has 41,000 members across the country out of the total workforce of 48,000 employees in the sector. It is a very high level of representation.

What has been ETUF's attitude since the revolution?

The ETUF did set up committees to stop any group of workers wanting to go on strike and join the demonstrators. The money the ETUF has accumulated through compulsory union dues and government funding was used to pay the

Kamal Abou Aita

thugs on the streets terrorising the population.

Many workers from all sectors have a great deal of anger against the ETUF. This is why when the university employees went on strike they abducted the vice president of the ETUF, who had come to put an end to it. The same thing happened at a steel plant.

Now, we are receiving daily messages from the ETUF, which is suddenly saying that it recognises the right to freedom of association and is proposing that we work together.

Does the new government meet your expectations?

I had a sleepless night after learning from the television that the new government's Labour Minister was a member of the ETUF leadership. There was no way we could accept it. The deputy prime minister then asked to meet Kamal Abbas of the CTUWS who supports independent unions and offered him the post of Labour Minister. But we recommended Ahmed Hassan El Bouray, who has been an ILO expert.

To our great surprise, it was the treasurer of the ETUF, who clearly has a hand in all the corruption mechanisms, who was appointed. He contacted us, as well as Kamal Abbas of the CTUWS and other independent trade unionists, but we refused to see him.

With the resignation of the prime minister on 3 March, we hope that he will also be replaced. The candidacy of Ahmed Hassan El Bouray, which we support, is still valid.

On 2 March, the first conference was held of the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions. How can it be made into a powerful instrument to defend the rights of all Egyptian workers?

This first conference on 2 March gave us the opportunity to publicly present our main demands for a minimum wage, social protection and respect for freedom of association.

Hundreds of workers are contacting us every day, asking to form unions, in all sectors, public and private alike. We try to advise them and tell them what the procedure is. It's a huge task.

How do you envisage the future development of this new federation?

An idea to develop would be the construction of a federa-

tion that is really capable of quickly bringing together all Egyptian workers. Putting together the workers' unions and the syndicates that currently represent doctors, lawyers, journalists, engineers. But we should also open it to the rural workers, the “fellahs”, who have never seen any kind of organising and yet they represent the heart of Egypt, which is traditionally a country of farmers.

How are you going to go about this?

The idea is to establish general trade union centres in all the governorates. For example, if a group of agriculture workers ask to join, they elect a trade union representative, which will allow them to then affiliate with the federation. Afterwards, they could also launch sectoral federations.

What is the position of women in the new independent trade union movement?

Thirteen out of the 46 members of the RETA Executive Committee are women, and our vice president is a woman. They are also well represented at grassroots level. Women played a key role during the strikes, handling a lot of the practical organisation of a strike involving as many as 50,000 workers. Twenty five percent of the leaders of the independent health technicians' union are women.

What are the main difficulties you now face?

Thanks to the revolution, the threats against our members and the attacks by security forces and employers have stopped. Our main challenge now is managing to handle the huge amount of requests we are receiving for the formation of first-level unions so that they can be established quickly and in line with the principles of trade union rights and freedoms. Having lived for decades under the single union system, a great deal of work is needed to change people's mindsets, as individuals, as well as to change the trade union language and habits. Most workers have never been able to exercise trade union rights. It is going to require a huge educational effort.

What kind of support are you expecting from the international trade union movement?

The ITUC's support, from our very beginnings, has been really important. The ITUC has always remained faithful to the principle of free trade unionism, refusing to work with the ETUF, which has helped a great deal.

Our affiliation to Public Services International (PSI) has also helped us a lot.

We do not want money. A range of experiences has shown that the influx of money from abroad does not produce good results and leads all too easily to a downward spiral of corruption. Education and training are our priorities.

We would also like to strengthen our ties with the trade unions in other North African countries, such as Tunisia and Morocco. These have more experience in the area of training, for women and young people, for example. We have solid experience in the area of strike action. We could exchange experiences and learn from one another.

• Interview by Natacha David on the ITUC website. www.ituc-csi.org

Fighting for free trade unions

Tamer Fathy, International Coordinator of the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services, spoke to *Solidarity*.

We held the first conference of our independent union federation yesterday [2 March].

It was attended by hundreds of activists from sectors including the retail tax collectors, health technicians, pensioners, teachers, telecommunications, textile workers, iron and steel, from the industrial regions of Sadat City.

The 24,000 workers at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company at Mahalla, in the Nile delta, have decided to leave the state union federation and join ours.

We have two main immediate demands:

1. That the government dissolves the official union federation, hands over its premises and documents, and recognises our federation.

2. That all global labour federations end the membership of the official unions and recognise and support our inde-

pendent unions.

We want a definite timetable for these demands, and for the establishment of collective bargaining.

The strikes which began before Mubarak fell are still spreading. Their main focus is the removal of corrupt bosses linked to the old regime, plus wage rises and permanent contracts for temporary workers. The army tried to ban these strikes, but failed completely. Now the authorities are engaged in a “cold war” against workers, trying to mobilise public opinion, arguing that this is not the time for strikes, that we need to build up “our” economy and so on.

They call our demands “sectional”, but we say they are social and national demands. We are fighting for the interests of the working-class majority.

In Mahalla, the workers launched an open strike to win a wage rise and remove the General Commissioner of the company. They won their demands, and one of the workers' leaders was appointed as the new General Commissioner.

The workers will be paid for their days on strike, but increase productivity to make up for the hours lost.

Some left activists have set up a new Labour Democratic Party. I'm not sure how big it is, or who exactly is involved. Some of this party's activists were at our conference yesterday, and they distributed a leaflet. My own view is that we need to build a strong union movement before we can form a party.

At the moment workers' demands are mainly economic. These must be satisfied before they can think about political demands. The key thing now is to build up the trade unions and after that we can talk about a labour party.

Unions in other countries should make solidarity with our demands for the dissolution of the official unions, and for their removal from the global union federations.

• For further reports on the conference see the Egypt Workers Solidarity website: egyptworkerssolidarity.org

Qaddafi on the way out?

Libya: “two dynamics from 1989”

Vijay Prashad is a professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut (USA) and the author of books including *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. He spoke to *Solidarity* about the social dynamics in the Libyan uprising. An unabridged version of this interview is available at tinyurl.com/vijayprashad.

A certain section has certainly benefited from oil revenue. A parasitic oil middle class has emerged. It's not the same as the middle class that's emerged in other gulf states, such as Bahrain, but it exists.

It has great clan features; in Libya there's very much a regional breakdown, and questions of clan affiliations have made it hard to topple Qaddafi. He has given a lot of advantages from the oil revenue to the western part of Libya, and the east-west divide is quite important.

There have been reports that some of the working-class

areas of Tripoli are now outside of Qaddafi's control. There were reports of a recent demonstration in a working-class neighbourhood that the troops cleared out. In any revolutionary situation, all kinds of grievances come to the fore whenever there is a little opening.

If I were a Libyan rebel, I would declare Benghazi the capital of free eastern Libya and say to the people of Tripoli “free yourselves and join us”.

Qaddafi has very much leaned on older forms of authority and rule. Back in 1969 there was a fear that Europe and America would not tolerate a Nasserite revolution in Libya. Qaddafi wasn't conducting a genuine socialist revolution; he was conducting a tribal consolidation with a socialist veneer. He did initially pursue policies that were generally seen as favourable by the population, but that started to undo in the 1980s.

The Senussis [the former royal family] say they want to return to Libya on the basis of establishing a constitutional

Middle East workers' solidarity

A new committee, Egypt Workers Solidarity, focused on supporting the new workers' movement in Egypt, was launched at a meeting in London on 17 February. Its website is at www.egyptworkersolidarity.org.

On that website: a model resolution for unions; a briefing on the unions, news of union organising.

Also a statement in support of the campaign. Signatories include many rank and file activists in the rail workers' union, RMT, members of the national executive of the National Union of Teachers and Matt Wrack (General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union), Len McCluskey (General Secretary, Unite), Tony Woodley (former Joint General Secretary, Unite), Paul Kenny (General Secretary, GMB).

Please help the campaign by circulating and getting further support for the statement.

Activists from Middle East Workers' Solidarity helped set up Egypt Workers Solidarity, and MEWS expects to be collaborating closely with the new group.

The Middle East Workers' Solidarity website gives up-to-date information on workers' activity in the whole region, and many links to background material.

• More: middle-east-workers.blogspot.com.

monarchy. But I doubt very much that this is a possibility, unless there's a total collapse of governance in Libya and Senussi returns on a British warship.

After 9/11, Qaddafi immediately seized on the fantasy of al-Qaeda. He gave a speech saying that if Libya falls to Islamists, they'll take over Europe. He's feeding a fear that already exists.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been in Libya for a very long time, but they have been suppressed. There are Brotherhood groups and Islamist intellectuals in many cities and I am sure they are directly involved in this rebellion, but they're not in the lead.

I'm not convinced that the Libyan Islamists who fought and trained in Afghanistan, people like the Islamic Fighting Group, have any kind of mass base. It's true that there were a lot of people at the funeral of [Ibn al-Shaykh] al-Libi [an al-Qaeda trainer who died in jail in Libya in 2009], but there are many reasons why people go to funerals. Islamism is mainly raised as a bogeyman by the regime.

One of the main leaders of the Fighting Group, Abu Abdurrahman Hattab [also known as Salah Fathi Bin Salman] was killed in 1997, and there hasn't been any major operation since then.

The experience of migrant workers in this uprising tells us a lot about the contemporary oil economy. If you go to any oil country you'll find vast numbers of unregistered workers from other countries. It's one of the great problems of modern imperialism. They're super-exploited workers. They often come from countries that don't even have aircraft to take them home. Britain and America can send aircraft and frigates to rescue fifteen people, but there are 3,000 or 4,000 Bangladeshis and their government doesn't have the capacity to bring them home.

Assessing the possible outcomes of the whole situation is a big question. Military intervention from the United States is not on the table. Gates [US Secretary of Defence] has said that even the imposition of a no-fly zone would be seen as a declaration of war, which I think was a very astute thing to say.

NATO has also so far discouraged any talk of intervention. History shows that whenever NATO and the US get involved with a conflict they cannot resist a little bombing. That will strengthen Qaddafi, as it did in 1986. There is no role for “liberal intervention”. Who makes the decisions about no-fly zones? Who gets to police the world?

As a socialist, I obviously want to see socialist revolution. But pragmatically I feel like we are still trying to live up to the French Revolution. The Bolshevik revolution is yet to come. In some places you take what you can get, and fight the war with the army you have. Working people don't seem as yet to have the power to escalate to a socialist phase, so the path will have to run through something else. I'm not a stage-ist, but I do think you need a grounding in the reality of social consciousness.

In these rebellions there are two dynamics from 1989 going on, and neither from Eastern Europe. One 1989 dynamic is Tiananmen Square; the rebellions are pro-democracy, and people want basic freedoms. The other 1989 dynamic is the Venezuelan Caracazo, which instigated the anti-IMF revolts.

So there's the pro-democracy side, a fight for bourgeois freedoms, and these rebellions are also against neo-liberalism. One set of coordinates is positive, the other negative. We don't yet know what's possible.

International working women's day

By Cathy Nugent

I had resolved to avoid reading the *Guardian* on Tuesday 8 March. I knew they would be publishing a "100 most inspiring women list" on this, the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. And I had no desire to revisit the taste of my breakfast on my way into work.

The list had been trailed in the paper some weeks before and promised to include Margaret Thatcher, Oprah Winfrey and Hillary Clinton. Hence the anticipation of nausea. In the event, the list was not as bad as I expected, just boring and predictable.

And the *Guardian* did not bother to enquire about or explain the origins of this 100-year-old tradition. That in itself is galling enough.

International Women's Day — or rather International Working Women's Day as it was to be called when established after 1911 — was first formally proposed by Clara Zetkin and other socialists (though the idea is said to be older than that). It was not about "celebrating" the lives of women, as is the modern "spin". Not even about celebrating the lives of extraordinary *working-class* women — though we can and should do that. That is what Jill Mountford does in her column in this paper ("On Whose Shoulders We Stand").

It was about making solidarity with the trade union and other class struggles of working-class women. It was about supporting their demands for higher wages, against sweatshop conditions, for nurseries and for the right to vote.

For many years now the "working-class" has gone out of International Women's Day. At best it is a "celebration" of feminist (and not so) feminist women in history, the arts, politics and sport. At worst it is a day when local councils put on free aromatherapy sessions. Though in these austere times it's probably a "how to make a cushion cover out of your old frock" session, make-do-and-mend being the latest soft-focus feminist thing among the middle class people who put on these things.

So the *Guardian* list was never going to be about women organising. It was always going to be about women using

their power, position and celebrity status to "do for" other women.

The list includes far too many women who do charity in Africa (Emma Thompson, etc.) and elsewhere. The African women represented are not ordinary women who have organised in the communities where they live.

Of course it would be churlish to resent the inclusion of Wangari Maathai in the list. Wangari Maathai won a Nobel Prize for her campaigns against environmental destruction in Kenya.

But she is unusual. She is university educated (winning a scholarship to a US university in the 1960s). She is, now, an MP.

And that is what is really wrong with these lists. A little research could have turned up women who have done equally extraordinary things with their lives but have received little or no mainstream recognition for what they do. And who don't do what they do "for" other women but as part of a wider struggle alongside other women.

Take a woman like Dita Sari, for example. Dita Sari helped set up and develop an independent left trade union in Indonesia which organised sweatshop workers. The recogni-

tion she got for her work she rejected! In 2002 she refused a \$50,000 human rights award from Reebok as a protest against the company's disregard for workers' rights. For many years she lived where she worked, alongside her comrades, in the union headquarters in Jakarta.

There are very many women like Dita Sari in the world, and we value their work because they see themselves as part of collective struggles that can change the world. Women for whom the idea of doing something for "glory" or individual recognition is a ridiculous waste of life.

In the last issue of *Solidarity* Jill Mountford highlighted the life of Ada Nield Chew, who fought for votes for working-class women in order to give women leverage in society, to strengthen the fight to improve their conditions as workers. If she were around today she might approve, with the *Guardian*, of Lady Gaga and her flaunting of convention. That's the kind of woman she was too.

Nonetheless, ultimately, she was more interested in what the exploited, undervalued and unrecognised majority of women want.

And that is what International Working Women's Day means to me.

To commemorate international women's day in Liverpool, a statue has been put up on St George's Plateau of Mary Bamber.

Mary was a supporter of the Russian revolution and a founding member of the Communist Party — when it was a revolutionary organisation. A socialist, an organiser of working-class women, a supporter of the 1911 transport strike, and on the Bloody Sunday march in that dispute. She was a comrade of Sylvia Pankhurst — who broke with the right-wing suffragettes.

In 1920, she attended the Second Congress of the Third International in Moscow. She was a local committee member on the National Unemployed Workers Committee and, in September 1921, was one of those arrested at the occupation of the Walker Art Gallery.

If she were alive today, Mary would be fighting the cuts brought in by Tories, heckling and protesting against Labour councillors for carrying out the Tory cuts! International women's day is a day when our movement should defend and fight for political and economic rights for working class women.

**International Women's Day March
Saturday 12 March, 12.30, St George's
Plateau, Liverpool
Organised by Merseyside Women's Movement
with the International Women's Day Conference
being held at Bluecoat Chambers**

Climate Camp shuts down... itself

By Bob Sutton

The Camp for Climate Action, a network of direct-action environmentalists, whose main activity has been to organise a series of annual protest camps between 2006-2010, has dissolved itself. I was involved with the network for most of that time.

The 2007 Climate Camp at the site of the proposed third runway at Heathrow airport was the first political activity I got seriously involved in. I already thought of myself as a socialist and had read a couple of things. Growing up and going to school and college where I did had given me an embryonic understanding of class, and racism. But it was all half-baked.

The political baggage I had inherited from my parents, both one-time members of the Revolutionary Communist Group, meant that I thought the most useful thing for me to do was finish my A-levels, then head to Latin America and put myself at the disposal of either the Cuban or the Venezuelan regime. I'm quite lucky I didn't ever get very far.

It was through a friend from college that I found out about the camp. He had been part of the Forest School Camps, where a lot of the friendship groups that made up the core "cadre" of the Camp had originated.

The camp was not like anything I'd ever seen. 2,000 people in a squatted field in West London living, cooking, washing together. It seemed to be the closest thing to "communism" going on in that part of the world. I thought it was great. The process of endless meetings, run according to "consensus decision making" struck me as being massively wasteful and self-indulgent. The only thing I could counterpose it to in my head was a group of bearded guys in berets giving orders (in Spanish).

I had never planned on getting particularly involved, but I had nothing better to be doing and so stayed around. I was part of something which felt big, fresh, inspiring and youthful. It was showing how the world could be different, and pulling off some very impressive confrontations with the police.

The end of the line for Climate Camp

Through being part of one of these confrontations and some bad luck, I was arrested and falsely charged with assaulting two police officers. This put the trip to Latin America on hold. But I stayed involved, largely getting into a lot of the practical skills stuff.

The 2008 camp was at the Kingsnorth coal fired-power station, where I threw myself into chopping wood and resisting the cops. It was here that I first really met members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. They were organising the Workers' Climate Action contingents that were leafleting the plant each morning, holding a meeting on women and the miners' strike. They got Clara Osagiede, leader of the London Underground cleaners' strike, to speak, got Arthur Scargill to come and debate on coal. They took the piss out of me for my Hugo Chavez t-shirt and a boycott Israel

sticker, but they also wanted to know what I thought about the world.

They proposed a form of anti-capitalism which made sense to me, looking to the working-class, to solidarity, to challenge and overthrow the system and its horrors.

It increasingly became clear that most people involved in Climate Camp saw capitalism as something to pour a bucket of paint over. They conceived of the camp, and other "protest movements", as a ready-made utopia that would penetrate and spread over the old rotten order like a virus, and create a world in its image.

Moreover, when "off site" faced with the real world and the questions it poses, the politics drawn upon were basically a variant of NGO left-liberalism. The underlying premise of a lot of the "direct action" is that "getting in the media" is the be all and end all — the bourgeois press is the only conceivable conduit of "revolutionary" politics.

I became increasingly aware of how this conception of "activists" as the agency for change in the world was a block to those people effectively making solidarity. Relatively few "campers" made it down to the Vestas wind turbine factory workers' occupation, while thousands descended on Blackheath in South London to camp "against the city", largely ignoring the working-class communities in the area.

I think the role of the Climate Camp was, following on from the "conference hopping" protest movements of earlier in the decade, a way for middle-class anti-capitalists to generate confrontation with the state. It's a symptom of the low level of real class-struggle. Therefore it was always characterised by a short attention span and a disregard for patient organisational or educational work.

Consensus is a form of organising shaped by these politics. It militates against scientifically thrashing out ideas, or any real notion of commitment to common struggle or accountability — no one is obliged to do anything they don't want to do.

There is much more to be said about the matter. I do hope however that the dissolution of the Camp will be part of a wider process of thrashing these questions out in the struggle to develop a coherent fight against the cuts.

Anarchism, Marxism, and polemic

By Martin Thomas

The polemicists have invoked the Anarchist Federation as proof that my criticisms of anarchism in *Solidarity* 3/195 were unjust. Let's see what the Anarchist Federation says.

Its website recommends an interview with an AF member which says:

"Too often the anarchist scene is incredibly elitist. There are loads of friendship groups doing things that exclude the participation of working-class people. They have no structures that allow people to join them, no internal democracy that places everyone on an equal footing. No point of contact for people new to anarchism. And ultimately no staying power".

This is the AF itself, describing what most anarchist activity is like. (The AF, whatever its virtues, is a tiny minority among self-described "anarchists").

It's a harsher description than I made! And I stressed in the article that some anarchists are different. Some anarchists gear their activity to working-class struggle as Marxists do. They cannot justly be condemned "by association" with the other anarchists, and I did not try to condemn them that way.

One reason for writing the article is that on many issues we find some anarchists much closer to us, that is, much more oriented to an independent working-class standpoint, than many would-be Marxists and Trotskyists. We share with class-struggle anarchists an emphasis on rank-and-file organising (against an orientation to the "left" bureaucracies in the labour movement) and a rejection of the Stalinoid organisational norms still common on the left.

Like many class-struggle anarchists, we emphasise the struggles of those elements of the working class — undocumented and precarious workers, for example — often ignored by the mainstream labour movement. And on international issues, our perspective has more in common with the focus on international working-class solidarity of most class-struggle anarchists than it does with the "Trotskyists" who orient to Hamas or Hezbollah or the Muslim Brotherhood on grounds of supposed "anti-imperialism".

In my *Solidarity* 3/195 article I stated that one sort of anarchists — anarcho-syndicalists — "focus on the wage-working class" and have a "coherent idea of what to do in un-revolutionary times". They have ongoing, structured organisation.

But, I argued, anarcho-syndicalists' dogmas constrain them to do their "political activity... with one hand tied be-

hind their backs" and they conflate "the three distinct roles played in a Marxist perspective by three distinct sorts of organisation — the workers' political party (or proto-party), the unions, and the workers' councils".

There's been no comment on that criticism of anarcho-syndicalism. But some writers denounce my article on the grounds that there are variants of class-struggle anarchism other than anarcho-syndicalism. They say my article amounted to smearing non-syndicalist class-struggle anarchism by lumping it together with liberal or lifestyle-ist or utopian anarchism.

They have a fair point against the draft version of my article, which I posted on the web and which attracted the comment. In the final printed version, which I'd worked on more carefully, I wrote: "Some anarchists — primarily the anarcho-syndicalists, who on this issue have the same idea as Marxists do — identify with the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state..." Primarily the anarcho-syndicalists; not exclusively the anarcho-syndicalists. I think "primarily" is right, and I'll explain why in the course of this response.

Toby, writing under the name Dee, asserts that my critical comments on writers in the historic tradition of anarchism, Proudhon, Bakunin, Bookchin, etc., are malicious and arbitrary smears on today's anarchists, because those writers have "no modern sway".

Proudhon and Bakunin maligned

"[Proudhon] did not even see industrial capital as exploitative. In his view only financial and merchant capital were exploitative".

Not remotely true — Proudhon was quite explicit that exploitation was a product of wage-labour, of workers selling their labour/liberty to a boss, that it happened in production. Indeed, his theory of why industrial capital is exploitative is similar to Marx's — except that Proudhon argued it first.

Only someone utterly ignorant of Proudhon's ideas would make such a statement — I guess that they have been spending too much time reading *The Poverty of Philosophy* rather than Proudhon!

And, let us be honest, there are very, very few mutualists around — invoking Proudhon is irrelevant because most anarchists are revolutionaries, not reformists! But I guess it sets the tone for what comes next.

"Bakunin did not see the working class as the central agent of revolution. He considered peasants and the urban unemployed, beggars, petty criminals, etc. to be much more potent revolutionary forces".

Absolute nonsense...

Iain McKay

Anarchists are class-struggle people

Just as not every self-styled socialist can actually be considered a socialist — so too it is with anarchism. See for example, "Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism", which argues with some evidence that the only type of anar-

chism is class struggle anarchism — hence Proudhon, Bookchin, as well as primitivist, individualist, utopian "anarchists" cannot be considered anarchist.

"Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the 'father of anarchism', was opposed to unions, strikes, and class struggle". Right, given that his ideas on unions, strikes and class struggle (or any of his ridiculous petty-bourgeois mutualist ideas) have literally zero sway in contemporary anarchist thought, the relevance of this is...?

For what it's worth, in anarchist circles I've been involved with, the only ideas of Proudhon's given any notice are his ideas on surplus value — ideas which Marx (who, in the opinion of almost every anarchist I've met, is an infinitely better thinker and more useful and closer to our politics than Proudhon) was massively influenced by.

"Bakunin did not see the working class as the central agent of revolution. He considered peasants and the urban unemployed, beggars, petty criminals, etc. to be much more potent revolutionary forces."

You're going for the classic "anarchists only care about peasants" line. I didn't realise that was still used against anarchists for real. You've got Bakunin wrong, as it happens. Having said that, I don't know a single living anarchist who bases their ideas on his...

Why write a massive load on anarchist politics that have no modern sway? In doing so you make anarcho-syndicalism (and all other types of class struggle anarchism, which don't seem to exist for you...) sound marginal — when actually the vast majority of anarchists and anarchist struggles have been class struggle in nature. You do it to malign anarchism, and that is the purpose of this essay, there is no honest intent to it.

Toby

Martin Thomas's article in *Solidarity* 3-195, "Working-class struggle and anarchism", has prompted a long debate on our website. We print excerpts from two contributions and a reply to the debate by Martin Thomas. The original article and entire debate can be found at workersliberty.org/anarch1.

Others respond in a contrary way, by arguing that Proudhon, Bakunin, etc. did focus on working-class struggle.

Anarchists polemicising with Trotskyists often concern themselves heavily with history — Trotskyists are damned because of what Trotsky did about Kronstadt in March 1921, or what he said in the Bolsheviks' "trade-union debate" in late 1920 — but plainly many anarchists today think that critical comments on Proudhon or Bakunin are just irrelevant point-scoring, because "no-one thinks that today".

Our view, which we apply to our own tradition as well as to the anarchist tradition, is that everyone's thought is heavily shaped by environment and tradition. As Keynes put it: "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist."

We can hope to escape being overwhelmed by the ideological influences around us — either directly, or indirectly, by forming our ideas by knee-jerk reaction — only by learning from an independent tradition which we study thoroughly and critically. We identify with the "Third Camp" Trotskyism of the Workers' Party and the Independent Socialist League, and yet we argue that both Shachtman and Draper got some things seriously wrong.

We call ourselves Trotskyists and we think Trotsky was wrong to hold to the characterisation of the USSR as a "degenerated workers' state" in the 1930s. We call ourselves Marxists, and many of us think Marx was wrong, for example, on the "tendency of the rate of profit to fall".

We pore over the history because we believe, like Isaac Newton, that if we can see anything clearly it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

ISAAC BARROW

It's the same reason why Marx spent so much effort unpicking the ideas of Feuerbach, Proudhon, Ricardo, and others, the people who for him were what Isaac Barrow was for Newton.

When we discuss other schools of thought — like anarchism — we have the same approach. We take the ideas seriously. We dig through the history. It is not gratuitous.

It could make sense to use Kropotkin's term "anarchist communism" for your politics, while criticising Kropotkin on some issues — say, his support for World War One — and analysing how your criticisms relate to the core of Kropotkin's ideas. But to us it makes no sense to say airily that the whole history of your own tradition is irrelevant because it has "no modern sway".

Tom Dale and Iain McKay take the contrary tack: they defend Proudhon and the rest of the traditional anarchist writers as champions of working-class struggle.

That Kropotkin generally sympathised with "the people" and even with "the workers", I don't doubt. That "Bakunin supported unions and strikes" I wrote in so many words.

Proudhon's statement that "the proletariat must emancipate itself without the help of the government" I quoted deliberately, so as to give the strongest evidence for the claim that Proudhon saw working-class struggle as the lever of change.

My argument was not that most anarchists fail to see working-class struggles as good examples of the "direct action" by "self-organised groups" against large-scale authority which they favour. It was that anarchism, where "the axis is the small local autonomous group (or even individuals) against (any) state, rather than workers against capital", is constitutionally less able than Marxism to find a way that "the minority can act today so as best to contribute to majority action tomorrow [which can replace capitalism]".

It is logical and a flaw, not an aberration and not a virtue,

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that most (not all) anarchists prefer “affinity” groups and one-off actions to ongoing organisation structured around definite political ideas.

In *The Philosophy of Poverty* — yes, I have read it, and not just Marx’s polemic against it — Proudhon writes of “liberty”, “equality”, “association”, “solidarity”, and even of “a war of labour against capital”.

Proudhon wishes well for the workers, in general. But he opposes strikes. His characteristic stance is that of the “man of science” pointing the way forward to be achieved by people in general understanding his enlightened views.

He seems to me to have the not-uncommon disdain of the self-consciously brainy self-educated skilled worker (which is what he was, though in later life he owned his own business and then worked as a manager) for the “average” worker.

“The day labourer has judged himself: he is content, provided he has bread, a pallet to sleep on, and plenty of liquor on Sunday. Any other condition would be prejudicial to him, and would endanger public order...”

Dockers he describes as grossly overpaid, “drunken, dissolute, brutal, insolent, selfish, and base”. “One of the first reforms to be effected among the working classes will be the reduction of the wages of some at the same time that we raise those of others”.

As for the rank and file in his own trade: “There are few men so weak-minded, so unlettered, as the mass of workers who follow the various branches of the typographic industry”. (And, for the anti-feminist Proudhon, even worse! “The employment of women has struck this noble industry to the heart, and consummated its degradation”).

He explains industrial profit as exclusively what mainstream economists would later call “pioneer’s profit” and “reward for risk”. “The net product belongs to [the man of enterprise] by the most sacred title recognised among men — labour and intelligence. It is useless to recall the fact that the net product is often exaggerated, either by fraudulently secured reductions of wages or in some other way. These are abuses... which remain outside the domain of the theory”.

BAKUNIN

As Daniel Guérin, a sympathetic commentator on Bakunin, puts it: “It was quite unjustly, reckoned Bakunin, that Marx and Engels spoke with the greatest distrust of the lumpenproletariat, of the slum proletariat, for it is in it and in it alone, and not in the bourgeoisified layers of the worker masses, that the spirit and the force of the future revolution resides.”

In relation to Bakunin, Toby accuses me of “going for the classic ‘anarchists only care about peasants’ line”. Where does he get that from? Anarchists, Bakunin included, tend not to differentiate much between peasants and the urban poor; the Zapatistas (not anarchists, but admired by many anarchists) are peasant-oriented; so was Makhno; so were the Russian Bakuninists when Plekhanov was their leading figure, before he became a Marxist.

But Bakunin saw the urban poor as the people most likely to organise spectacular, disruptive, localised “direct action” of the sort he considered most destructive to “authority”. Of course! Only, that’s different from having a strategy based on the material tendencies of capitalism and the specifically working-class struggles generated within it.

When Kropotkin came to write concise expositions of anarchism, he defined the driving force as the resurgence of a natural human order blocked only temporarily by the historical aberration of the State, and showing itself again in the way that “voluntary societies invade everything and are only impeded in their development by the State”. (A sort of left-wing version of David Cameron’s “Big Society”).

When young people call themselves “anarchist”, often all they mean is that they are left-wing but not yet sufficiently convinced to commit themselves to regular activity, instead preferring to join “actions” from time to time, or to gear their activity into a friendship group rather than a spelled-out strategy.

They have not studied Proudhon or Bakunin or Kropotkin. But those writers’ focus on the small local group against authority in general, filtered through anarchist culture over the decades, is surely what makes the label “anarchist” attractive to them.

FEDERATION

The Anarchist Federation is as critical of that sort of loose anarchism as we are. So, what of AF anarchism?

The interview quoted above is recommended by the AF website to the reader who wants “to find out more about the kinds of things AF members get up to”.

“We’re working heavily on the anti-ID campaign... The London comrades [do mainly admin and journalistic stuff but] somehow they find time to go on the streets and do solidarity actions too! Some of our members are busy setting up or sustaining social centres. Others are busy in their local IWW branches. Then of course there’s asylum-seeker support...”

All good stuff, and all in broad terms “class struggle” activity. It differs from what the AWL does in its balance — in that we focus mainly on organising in workplaces and

unions, and on self-education and the education of those around us. But that difference in focus is largely what my original article was about.

The bit of AF activity specifically focused on long-term working-class organisation (as distinct from more generic “the-people-against-power” stuff) is work in the IWW, a syndicalist organisation, suggesting that I wasn’t wrong to identify anarcho-syndicalism as the “primary” form of worker-focused anarchism.

The AF’s “Introduction to Anarchist Communism” extolls working-class struggle at length. But how does working-class struggle fit into AF strategy? And when the AF extolls working-class struggle, is that a roundabout way of extolling “direct action” in general, or a focus on the class character of struggle? That is less clear.

The AF states that the future society will be run by “local collectives and councils”. The AF pushes two things as the means for those “local collectives” to get strong enough to organise society: “direct action” and “self-organisation”, also summed up as “a culture of resistance”.

REPRESENTATIVE

“Self-organised groups” are defined as those in which “everyone has an equal say and no one is given the right to represent anyone else. This kind of group is capable of deciding its own needs and taking direct action to meet them in a way that any hierarchical group based on representatives — like a political party or a trade union — cannot”.

No representatives. Not even the most democratically-elected and accountable representatives. So, the groups must indeed be “local”. Very local. It is hard to see how on the AF’s criteria even the workers of a single large factory could become a “self-organised group”. Even anarcho-syndicalist unions have not been able to do without elected delegates, committees, secretaries, stewards, and so on. (The AF praises workers’ councils as they they have existed in history, but makes no comment on the fact that these have been councils of... representatives).

How will the “local collectives” coordinate — as they must in any future society unless it is to try to reverse the development of productive forces within capitalism, which long ago went long beyond not only the small-workshop scale but even the national scale? Maybe the AF relies on Kropotkin’s argument that a natural human propensity to cooperate will solve the problem. I don’t know.

The anarcho-syndicalists, at the cost of some disrespect to anarchist dogma, had an answer to the question of coordination. Revolutionary unions — organising, through representative structures, far wider than locally — would do it.

Beyond doubt the AF, like Bakunin and Kropotkin, sympathises with the working class and favours biff and strife. And, because of anarcho-syndicalist influence I’d guess, it uses the term “working-class struggle” more than Bakunin or Kropotkin. But if you unpick the argument, you see that biff is valued primarily as “direct”, “self-organised”, and “local”, rather than primarily as working-class.

Indeed, Marxists see struggle as “class” in character partly to the extent that it goes beyond the “local” and the immediately “self-organised”. Logically, anarcho-syndicalists have, or should have, the same perception.

The AF’s strategic focus on working-class struggle is qualitatively less clear than that of anarcho-syndicalists.

SYNDICALISM

The critics accuse me of conflating anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism.

In my article, I argued that anarcho-syndicalism was the most Marxist-influenced strand of anarchism; and, in my view, Trotsky was right to describe revolutionary syndicalism in its great days as “a remarkable rough draft of revolutionary communism” (i.e. revolutionary syndicalism also influenced Bolshevik Marxism as it developed after 1917).

The spectrum of revolutionary syndicalism ranges from variants of anarchism more attentive to working-class struggle, but still fundamentally geared to a “spontaneous-local-group-versus-structured-central-authority” axis of thinking, through to politics only a shade different from revolutionary Marxism.

Revolutionary syndicalism is, so to speak, a “transitional” political category. I think the history bears out that view.

I believe that the term “anarcho-syndicalism” was (like many other labels in politics) first coined as a pejorative term by opponents — in France in the early 1920s, by Marxists (many of them former revolutionary syndicalists who had not abjured their past, but had moved on) in their battles against the “pure” revolutionary syndicalists inside the CGTU (the more left-wing union federation, formed by expulsion from the reformist-syndicalist CGT).

In the great days of revolutionary syndicalism, before 1914, in France (the CGT) and the USA (the IWW), there was a range of views. Daniel De Leon was a sort of “Marxist-syndicalist”. He took up syndicalists’ ideas about transforming the trade-union movement on the basis of its elemental struggles but insisted that such activity must be coupled with “political” party activity (so far, so good, I think; but he had not yet worked out how to integrate the two wings of his strategy fully). There were anarchists in the IWW, but most leading members were not anarchists. Many had a diluted version of De Leon’s scheme, being members of both

the IWW and the Socialist Party but without fully integrating the two dimensions.

There were similar people in the CGT. Victor Griffuelhes, general secretary of the revolutionary syndicalist CGT in its great days, was a member of the Socialist Party (of its “Blanquist” faction). But two of the main writers of the CGT, Fernand Pelloutier and Emile Pouget, were anarchists. Pelloutier was also influenced by Marxism, having been an organised Marxist before he became an anarchist.

Some of my critics claim that anarcho-syndicalism can be sharply differentiated from revolutionary syndicalism; but historically it usually hasn’t been, and some anarchists claim revolutionary syndicalism as their own. Iain McKay, in his “Anarchist FAQ”, argues of “Bakunin and Kropotkin... that many of their ideas were identical to those of revolutionary syndicalism”.

To the (varying, and never total) extent that it stresses “direct action” above longer-term organising and education and shies away from “politics”, revolutionary syndicalism connects to anarchism. But revolutionary syndicalism of any sort inevitably involves some shift away from “pure” anarchism. How big that shift can be, and yet you still call yourself an “anarcho-syndicalist”, depends I think more on fashion and personal taste than any rigid demarcation.

By crediting anarcho-syndicalism, in my original article, with all the virtues of revolutionary syndicalism, I was giving anarcho-syndicalism its strongest case, before criticising it. I was doing the very opposite of smearing it by false association.

POLEMICAL

The experience of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism — and its leaders’ decision to join the bourgeois Republican governments during the Spanish Civil War — is well-trodden ground in debates between Marxists and anarchists. That’s why I essayed a new angle, referring to France instead.

But Spain is relevant to the “Isaac Barrow” question. The AF “Introduction” has a page extolling the virtues of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists in the 1930s. What about them joining the Barcelona and Madrid bourgeois governments? The AF refers to that in passing as a “mistake”.

Just that — a “mistake”, as if they’d dialled a wrong digit when making a phone call. No discussion of why the “mistake” was made and what should be learned from it.

Rudolf Rocker wrote a pamphlet about Spain at the time. He didn’t comment on the anarchists joining the government, but focused only on defending them against Stalinist smears. Murray Bookchin wrote a full-scale article looking back at Spain. Mainly he tells us that he finds the Spanish anarchists “admirable”. He, too, suggests that joining the bourgeois governments was a mistake, but without conclusions.

Where will I find a rigorous anarchist critique of Proudhon or Bakunin? Bakunin described his ideas as “Proudhonism, extensively expanded upon and taken to its logical consequences”, but quietly dropped Proudhon’s opposition to unions and strikes without any full critique. Kropotkin wrote surveys of the evolution of anarchist thought, but presenting it as a bland progress, with no real polemic. And so, I think, it goes on.

Anarchists do not go much for criticising their comrades rigorously. They often spray venom at Marxists, from a distance, and they sometimes criticise their own: I’ve quoted the AF criticising anti-organisation anarchists; Malatesta did the same; and Bookchin wrote criticisms of different strands of anarchism. But developed polemic is rare. Although, as far as I can make out, the cult of “consensus decision-making” comes more from Quakers and capitalist management-expert advocates of “ringiseido” than from anywhere on the left, some anarchists today have adopted it as a point of honour.

As the sympathetic Daniel Guérin puts it: “The traits of anarchism are difficult to circumscribe. Its masters have almost never condensed their thought into systematic treatises... Libertarians [are] particularly inclined to swear by ‘anti-dogmatism’... Anarchism is, above all, what you might call a gut revolt...”

But “don’t polemicise against those you work with” tends to mean also: don’t work with those who polemicise. Even the most considered critic, Toby, declares that he’ll find it “very difficult to work with AWL members unless they disavow my article’s criticisms.”

Trotskyists are often accused of sectarianism and factionalism. Yet no AWL member would shy away from working in an anti-cuts committee or a stewards’ committee or a union caucus with SWPers or SPers — or Labour loyalists, or anarchists — on the grounds that those groups make polemics against us much ruder than mine against anarchism!

We take it for granted that political and polemical differ by only two letters...

Anarchists don’t. That is why the demarcations among anarchists are chronically unclear (despite Tom Dale’s assertion that they are “as clear as in any other field”). That is why anarchist organising (even for those anarchists who do organise) can never adequately form a “memory of the working class” — never adequately and systematically work over the lessons of past struggles to bring ideas from them to new struggles.

High Street post office workers to strike

By Stewart Ward

Postal workers have voted by over 90% to strike in a dispute over pay and job losses.

The workers, who work behind counters at Britain's 373 "Crown" Post Offices (larger PO branches), have not been balloted since 2007. Post Office Ltd, owned by Royal Mail, has refused to consider a pay increase for counter staff, despite making increased profits of £72 million last year, and giving managers a 2.25% pay rise and a 21% rise for directors. Management is

also refusing to renew a guarantee, valid until April 2011, that no further branches will be closed.

Dave Ward, the deputy general secretary of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), which organises Post Office staff, said "Post Office workers have sent a clear message to management in this ballot that they are not prepared to take double standards when it comes to pay. However, this ballot is about more than pay; it is the job security of our members and the future of the Crown office network which is also at stake."

Around 4,000 workers are employed by the Crown network, which make up the majority of larger Post Office sites, including most high-street branches. 66% of CWU members in the network turned out to vote in the ballot, which saw only 172 workers voting against strike action.

Strikes could begin at the end of March, and while they would not initially affect the rest of the Post Office network or delivery services, they would effectively close down nearly 400 of the UK's busiest and most frequently used Post Offices.

With the Coalition already having announced plans to part-privatise Royal Mail, the threat of further Post Office closures

and consequent job losses is very real indeed. This dispute represents a frontline battle not just for postal workers but for the entire public sector and the

notion of publicly-owned services in the UK. **Organising active solidarity must be an urgent priority for the labour movement.**

Cuba and the unions

By Ira Berkovic

An article on the front page of the Communication Workers' Union website proclaims that it is now "more important than ever" to make solidarity with Cuba.

A lengthy piece reporting on the visit of the new Cuban ambassador to the CWU's National Executive Committee quotes CWU leader Billy Hayes in his affirmation that "the achievements of Cuba are an inspiration."

Presumably he means the impressive healthcare system and literacy rates, but one wonders what the union has to say about Cuba's less "inspiring" "achievements" — its one-party state, its lack of free press, its ban on independent workers' organisation, its recent sacking of 500,000 public sector workers and, most recently, its steadfast support for Colonel Qaddafi in his attempt to massacre his own people.

One might also wonder why Egypt's new trade unions, or indeed the Libyan uprising itself, are not given similar attention when their need for solidarity is surely greater.

Socialists in the CWU will feel galled by the fact that their leaders are prepared to proclaim the need for "solidarity" with "socialist Cuba" despite the realities of the country's regime and even while they sit on attempts to build working-class militancy (the raw ingredient of real socialism) at home.

The uncritical support of trade union leaders for Cuba shows the extent to which Stalinism is still ingrained in the political DNA of the British labour movement leadership, and how much that leadership needs changing.

Day of action for ESOL

By an ESOL teacher

The Action for ESOL campaign has called a national day of action against cuts to ESOL funding for 24 March.

Actions can be large or

small — the main thing is that we get as much attention as we can!

Ideas for action:

- a demonstration outside your college or workplace
- public meetings, in or outside college premises (if your college is not friendly to this, try local community centres)
- leafletting, pickets
- pickets
- symbolic actions such

as: students taping their mouths in protest and holding hands round the college building (thanks to students at Greenwich Community College for this one)

• community language awareness and skill-sharing talks and workshops

Visit the website: www.actionforesol.org. See also NATECLA: www.natecla.org.uk.

In brief

By Darren Bedford

WILDCAT

A wildcat strike at a BP plant near Hull has forced management to back down on plans for unilateral redundancies.

The GMB and Unite members, opposed attempts by Redhall (an engineering construction contractor operating on the site) to impose redundancies that were outside the framework of the nationally-bargained collective agreement for the industry. 400 workers walked off the job and blocked the main road into the site, backing up rush-hour traffic.

The strike marks a further flare in militancy in an industry that saw enormous unofficial strikes over similar attempts by bosses to disregard the terms of the national agreement. The strikes, though making necessary a political battle against chauvinistic hostility to migrant workers which threatened to poison the dispute, succeeded in winning significant concessions from management.

COURT VICTORIES

The RMT has won a major court victory against injunctions preventing a strike on the Docklands Light Railway.

The High Court granted the injunction to Serco Docklands in January 2011

after workers voted by an overwhelming majority to take 48 hours of strike action in a dispute around the victimisation of trade unions reps and what the RMT called "a breakdown in industrial relations".

Elsewhere on London Underground the RMT plan to escalate the ongoing fight against the sacking of Eamonn Lynch and Arwyn Thomas, two tube drivers victimised for their trade union activity. They plan a ballot of all driver members for strike action. Strikes have previously been limited to drivers on the Bakerloo and Northern lines.

Train drivers' union ASLEF also won its appeal against an injunction banning strike action by its members working for London Midland.

JOBCENTRE PLUS

The PCS union will ballot its members working in Jobcentre Plus call centres in a "widening" of a dispute that has already seen 2,000 workers take strike action.

Changes in working conditions have already seen nearly 20% of the total workforce leave their jobs since April 2010. The union says this results from a management "obsession" with hitting targets at the expense of quality public service. Conditions are set to worsen as JCP looks to axe nearly 10,000 staff before April 2012.

RAWMARSH
Teachers at Rawmarsh Community School in Rotherham have suspended their strike after winning some concessions from management.

The number of planned redundancies has been reduced from 25 to 7, and a nearby school has also backed off from similar plans as a result of the Rawmarsh strike. Union activists have reaffirmed their commitment to defeating redundancies entirely and are retaining the option to restart their strike action if necessary.

DEFEND STEVE HEDLEY

RMT London Regional Organiser Steve Hedley has been fined over £700 after allegedly "assaulting" a scabbing manager on a picket line at Mile End station.

Hedley had been attempting to persuade the manager to close the station, which was in use despite not having the legally-required numbers of trained staff to operate safely. Witnesses say that although the exchange was heated, little or no physical contact was made. Steve told *Solidarity* that he "never expected justice from the bourgeois courts. My case was presided over by a blue-rinse magistrate whose eyes glazed over as soon as she heard 'RMT'. I was guilty from then on." Steve plans to appeal against the fine.

UCU names strike dates

By a Further Education lecturer

Lecturers at 63 universities teaching more than 1,200,000 students will strike against to defend their pensions later this month.

Their union, UCU, has announced strikes for 17 March in Scotland, 18 March in Wales, 21 March in Northern Ireland and 22 March in England, followed by a strike across the UK on 24 March.

University employers want to amend the Universities Superannuation Scheme from 1 April to reduce pension benefits and increase costs for workers. For existing members of the scheme, contributions would go up. New starters would receive a career average rather than a final salary pension and lose thousands of pound a year.

UCU estimates that a lecturer who under the current system received a pension of £22,962 would get £15,704 under the new scheme. This is divide and defeat: the employers have made it clear that ultimately they want all staff in a career average scheme. In separate ballots members in post '92 institutions and FE members are also being balloted over the Teachers' Pension Scheme and pay. The success of the USS ballot should boost the other ballots. The other, unwelcome, boost is the

threat to the TPS: retirement age raised from 60 to 65, 50% increase in contributions, final salary to career average, and indexation from RPI to the lower CPI are all threatened.

Activists in UCU must ensure a big turnout and yes vote in the current ballots. Coordinated national action across FE and HE is the necessary next step.

Unison and PCS members should ask why their unions are failing to act against the job slaughter that is imminent. A class-wide attack needs a class-wide response... and sooner rather than later.

Students: support your lecturers!

Student walkouts, demos and occupations against fees and cuts were one front in the war to defend education. The UCU action is another.

We need unity between students and education workers if we are going to stop the government's attacks. We need student protests and occupations alongside the UCU strike.

The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts is launching a campaign to support the UCU. For details visit NCAFC website www.anticuts.com.

Vive La Commune!

An event to mark the 140th anniversary of the Paris Commune

Friday 18 March, 7pm-late, Lucas Arms, 245a Gray's Inn Rd, London WC1

Excerpts from Peter Watkins' film *La Commune de Paris 1871*

Plus speakers, exhibition, food, music
More information: 07796 690874

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

“Yes to Libya”, not “no to USA”

By Chris Reynolds

In Libya, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the army has not pushed aside the dictator challenged by mass upheavals. Qaddafi still controls much of the army. And so Libya is moving from street uprisings into civil war.

People at the chief rebel centre in Benghazi have called for military aid from the big powers, through a “no-fly zone” directed against warplanes controlled by Qaddafi. They oppose any idea of outside troops intervening on the ground.

Socialists should not give a blank cheque to US or British military intervention. In such matters, positive support for US or British military intervention can only be a blank cheque: imagining that we could “fine-tune” a military intervention by pressure of demonstrations or petitions is a fantasy.

Their history and their nature mandates an attitude of complete distrust to the US and British military.

But is it our job to try to stop the implementation of a no-fly zone, or the delivery of weapons to the anti-Qaddafi forces? Should we do as some on the left do, and hoist “no imperialist intervention” to the top of our slogans about Libya, downgrading “no to Qaddafi”? No.

A military intervention of a sort and on a scale that would establish US or British control over Libya's oil reserves, or put Libya in a condition of semi-colonial subjugation to the US or Britain, is very unlikely for two reasons.

After the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan, and with resources stretched by Afghanistan, even the US military is unwilling to take on anything open-ended. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates has been arguing strongly against even a “no-fly zone”.

Secondly, even if one state or another were confident and keen about intervening in the abstract, every state knows the risk that intervention would bring a backlash both from neighbouring states in the Middle East and North Africa, from other big powers, and probably from the Libyan people.

The US and Britain are considering military gestures because they know their dealings with Qaddafi will have discredited them in the eyes of the anti-Qaddafi opposition, and they want to restore credit.

Despite our distrust of the US and British states, we surely do not demand the lifting of the freezes they have put on the assets of Qaddafi and his associates.

Compare the “no-fly zone” operated against Saddam Hussein in the northern (Kurdish) part of Iraq by the US, Britain, and France from April 1991, after the Kuwait war. That “no-fly zone” provided some protection for the Kurds. To campaign for its removal would have been to campaign for Saddam Hussein to be free to bomb the Kurds.

We should support the people of Libya - and especially any democratic or working-class forces in the anti-Qaddafi movement. We should distrust the US government, but not let kneejerk “no to the USA” reactions dominate our thought.

Pensions: unions must organise industrial action

By Rhodri Evans

John Hutton, the renegade former Labour cabinet minister who is doing the Tories' dirty work on pensions, will publish his final report this Thursday, 10 March.

It will propose further worsening of public sector pensions on top of the two big attacks which the Government has already put into train.

Hutton's report should be a last-minute alarm signal to the unions to start fighting on pensions. Almost a year has passed now since the Government finalised its first decisions, and still the union leaders are saying “we'll have to seek negotiations, and if that doesn't work, then think about action”.

There have been no negotiations on anything but the fine detail of one aspect, and there won't be any until the unions decide on action!

From next month, April

2011, the yearly inflation-upgrading of public-sector and state pensions will be according to the CPI index and not the RPI. This means that the inflation-upgrading of your pension is, on average, about 0.8% less each year. After 25 years' retirement, your pension is cut by about 19%.

From April 2012, the Government will be demanding an extra 3% of your pay in pension contributions. The extra payment brings no improvement in pensions, in fact a worsening. In effect this is a 3% pay cut. The Government is negotiating only about the detail of how the total 3% will be spread over the workforce: will Jack pay 4% extra, and Jill 2%, or Jack 2% extra and Jill 4%?

As far as the Government is concerned, those attacks were set in stone almost a year ago. The union leaders' whining about seeking negotiations must sound to the

Government like a prisoner being led to the scaffold after trial who is still asking to have a discussion about what witnesses to call.

If the unions continue in the same way, then the Government is bound to feel confident about pushing ahead on Hutton's additional proposals, which, according to advance announcements, are:

- No NHS staff, civil servant, or teacher should get their full pension until 65 (or, as time goes on, even older). In 2005 the unions did a deal with the Labour government which kept a pension age of 60 for existing staff while making it 65 for new recruits. Now, predictably, the government will try to increase the pension age to 65 (or more) for everyone.

- Pension schemes should be moved from being pegged to “final salary” to being pegged to “career average” (as, for example, pensions for re-

cent-years recruits to the civil service already are).

In principle there are good arguments for this: the “final salary” pegging means that managerial grades, who can expect to get several promotions over their lifetime and end up on high pay just before they retire, get much better pensions than routine-grade workers who get few promotions.

However, the detail is decisive. “Career average” is a complex thing. Everything depends on how the “accruals” are worked out. Given the nature of the government making the change, we can be sure that the method of calculation proposed will be one that cuts pensions overall.

Hutton is reported to have rejected the idea of a “cap” on very high pensions, but possibly the Government will go for that anyway, for demagogic reasons.

Tower Hamlets education workers to strike against cuts

By a Tower Hamlets NUT member and a Tower Hamlets Unison member

Local government and education workers who are members of Unison and the National Union of Teachers are likely to strike together on 30 March against education cuts planned by Tower Hamlets council.

The NUT ballot returned an 85% vote for discontinuous strike action. The Unison ballot is in progress, after many false starts due to Unison Regional Office being over cautious about the legalities.

The NUT ballot asked members to vote, first, for a one-day protest strike, and, second, for discontinuous action should it be necessary in months to come. 85% of people voted yes to the first question, and 73% yes in response to the second; overall turnout was 39%.

Considering that so far in Tower Hamlets the cuts have only hit central services, a self-contained unit that provides floating support for schools, teachers and pupils, and therefore the vast majority of those balloted are yet not seeing any major cutbacks in their own schools, this is a really positive outcome.

A positive result in the Unison ballot would allow teachers and support staff to walk-out side by side — an important show of solidarity, since it is support staff that are increasingly in the most vulnerable positions.

Tower Hamlets is the first council where united union action is a prospect against the cuts. It should be the template for other areas fighting both the Con-Dem government's attacks on public services and the local councils who are passing them on without a murmur.

Lutfur Rahman, the independent Mayor, campaigned for the position against Labour on a distinctly anti-cuts platform. The independent councillors who left Labour with him in disgust at the way the Labour Party bureaucratically removed Rahman as their candidate also made a lot of rhetoric opposing the slashing of public services by the Government.

But it is they who are introducing cuts of over £70 million, threatening the jobs of up to 500 local government workers and

teachers.

They wring their hands and claim they wish they did not have to do it. It's not their fault. The government made them do it.

But they very quickly fall into justification for their actions. One independent councillor told the council cabinet last month that the closure of Junior Youth Service after-school clubs to non-working parents will give those parents an opportunity to spend quality time with their kids!

Labour councillors show no sign of standing on principle against the passing on of the government's attacks to local people either. While they debate in the council chamber about how best to minimise the effect of the cuts, how to make jobs disappear through natural wastage rather than compulsory redundancy,

Canary Wharf can be seen through the council chamber windows where bankers discuss how big they can make the bonuses of their senior directors without making life too difficult for the government who best represents their wishes.

The workers' voice must be heard. On 26 March the TUC demonstration gives workers the opportunity to demand of their leaderships that they bring all the trade unions out against these attacks in co-ordinated action across the whole public sector.

On 30 March in Tower Hamlets, we can start the ball rolling. One day in one borough will not be enough, but it could provide a spark to set other battles off in other areas.

A demonstration and rally that brings together workers, students, parents and the community is being planned. A one-day protest strike is a good start but it won't stop the cuts. The real test will be how we develop the struggle after 31 March.