

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



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For a workers' government



**Welcome
to uni**
page 3

**Anti-Islam
film**
pages 6-7



**Chinese workers
rise up**
page 8



TORIES PLAN TO CUT £50 BILLION

Royal College of Physicians report finds: ● Hospitals are already struggling to cope with an ageing population and increasing admissions ● A “looming crisis” in the medical workforce. Picture: savetraffordgeneral.com, campaigning to save A&E, ICU, children’s services and acute surgery at Trafford General Hospital

LABOUR:

**SEE
PAGE 5**

reverse the NHS cuts!

What is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?

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



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

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

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

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

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

We stand for:

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

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After Cameron-Clegg, what?

By Martin Thomas

According to a study published in the *Observer* on 23 September, living standards for poor and middling (that is, working-class) households in Britain will continue falling up to 2020, and by then will be 15% lower, for the worse-off, than in 2010.

The prediction assumes, optimistically, that overall economic growth will start again this year and run quite rapidly from 2015 to 2020. Even in that case, the tax-and-benefit changes made by the Cameron-Clegg coalition, and increasing inequality of wages which results from weakened trade unions, will work things so that by 2020 high-income households will be 15% better off than in 2010, but poorer households will be 15% below our 2010 level.

The prediction also excludes the increase in social inequity which will come from cuts in health, education, and other public services.

Mervyn King, governor of the Bank of England, has already said: "One has to go back to the 1920s to find a time when real wages fell over a period of six years".

UNPRECEDENTED
Now the unprecedented squeeze on the working class, while the wealthy prosper, is set to continue to 2020.

So the run-up to 20 October shows us a groundswell of working-class opinion that the Cameron-Clegg coalition, and its policies, must be ousted as soon as possible. But to replace them with what?

There is as yet no adequate debate in the labour movement on that. Shouting about one-day general strikes, or two-day general strikes, or general "fury", which can "crack the coalition" or "kick out rotten Tories", is no substitute for that debate, because it begs the question of the replacement.

The only alternative governing party with any links to the labour movement is Labour. But how will a Labour government tackle the capitalist crisis?

The Labour Party conference which starts in Manchester on 30 September should be the forum for the debate. But Luke Akehurst, a prominent figure close to the leadership, writes on Labour List: "This year I cannot think of a serious fight that will happen at conference".

"For decades", says Akehurst, "conference witnessed intense battles between the Labour left and right.

These were "over policies issues like nationalisation and nuclear disarmament, and over rule changes designed to change the balance of power between unions, CLPs, leader and PLP".

But now, or so Akehurst hopes, Labour has reached some sort of "end of history", or Buddhist condition of higher tranquillity, in which no debate is necessary — nor any questioning of a still-neoliberal Labour policy.

In fact there are issues on the agenda. Bridgend Constituency Labour Party (CLP) has a rule change to allow Conference to amend National Policy Forum documents, a measure which despite its seeming abstruseness would actually allow unions and CLPs to gain control over Labour policy.

There will be other rule changes from the National Executive, bounced on delegates with little or no notice.

Some CLPs have put in contemporary motions calling for Labour to commit to restoring the Health Service.

A National Policy Forum report will be put to conference. As Jon Lansman writes on leftfutures.org,

the way this report has been prepared and released just a few weeks before conference "reveals that little has yet changed in the way Labour makes its policy since the bad old days of New Labour...

On Trident, for example, the report promises only to "wait for the Lib Dems' Trident Alternatives Review, the framework of which only includes alternative nuclear weapon options, not scrapping a Trident replacement altogether".

On the NHS, the NPF report makes no commitment to a concerted restoration of the NHS as a public service, and no commitment to reverse the £20 billion Tory cuts in the NHS.

Probably the platform will try to bounce the report through conference on a single vote, with no scope for voting in parts, let alone amendments. The conference authorities are also likely to seek ways to rule out of order or otherwise sideline grassroots submissions like Bridgend's and the NHS motions.

There should be, but won't be, a debate at conference about whether Labour is going for a majority in 2015, or a coalition with the Lib-Dems. In a book published late in Au-

gust, Peter Hain stated that for practical purposes his aim is a coalition with the Lib-Dems.

Even on the left, coalition has supporters. Jon Lansman, at leftfutures.org, has proposed aiming to break the Lib-Dems from the Tory coalition and negotiate a new Lab/Lib coalition to run to 2015.

Why ever should Labour want to forego the opportunity of a general election if the Tories get into such trouble that the coalition breaks up?

In any case, a government which serves the working class even minimally cannot be constructed in coalition with the relentlessly neo-liberal Lib Dems. Mark Ferguson of Labour List, no left-winger, has written rightly that "a huge proportion of Labour supporters find the notion of going into coalition with the Lib Dems a fairly gruesome thought".

UNIONS

Opening out debate depends on the big unions, which have the clout to force issues onto the conference agenda and insist on a fair hearing for different views.

This year the Unite union has adopted a new policy document which commits it to a more active stance in the Labour Party.

However, the Unite motion for Labour Party conference, so we understand, is a bland one about increasing investment. And the National Coordinating Committee of Unite's "United Left" has declared (28 July) that the union "cannot" support Unite members who are Labour councillors and vote in line with Unite policy against the cuts: "there is a need to protect the Labour whip".

There is a greater need to help the working class protect itself against the capitalist onslaught.

After lobbying? Defiance!

By Gerry Bates

Andrew Fisher (*Solidarity* 255) rightly denounces the Tory plan to cut council tax benefits as a new "poll tax on individual students and unemployed people".

Yet he concludes only that "we need to work with councils and councillors to lobby government" against the plan. Speeches in Whitehall committees by Labour council leaders are not going to stop the plan, and in any case they have already been made.

Andrew dismisses,

without even mentioning it, the option of Labour councils *defying* the plan. The defiance would obviously have to be part of a mobilisation to defy the cuts overall, rather than on this single issue, but that strengthens, not weakens, the case for it. Otherwise Labour

councils will be reduced, more and more each year, to local agents of the escalating Tory cuts.

Under the Tory government of 1970-4, defiance of its Housing Finance Act by a single small Labour council, Clay Cross, was central to defeating that Act.

Under Thatcher, even the threat of defiance by Liverpool's Labour council — though eventually it went for rotten compromises and cuts — forced the Tories to make concessions.

• More:
www.workersliberty.org/defiance

Welcome to university. Now learn to fight

By Ira Berkovic

According to the phrase attributed to Irish poet WB Yeats, education is “the lighting of a fire, not the filling of a pail.”

If you’re starting university in Britain in September 2012, you may find getting the fire lit something of a struggle. Even filling the pail might be a stretch.

While never perfect, at its best higher education in this country has represented a protected space in the lives of some young people; a time to develop as human beings before they were subjected to the exigencies of wage labour.

One does not have to romanticise the regime in pre-1998 higher education to acknowledge that a socially-funded break from parental authority, and prior to the managerial authority of the workplace, represented something progressive and worth defending.

Access to higher education was never universal, but the introduction of tuition fees of up to £9,000 has sent access into a regressive tailspin. Applications for 2012/2013 were down nearly 10% at English universities (Scottish and Welsh institutions have different funding regimes).

English students can expect to graduate with a debt of nearly £60,000. University fees in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland are the highest in the whole of Europe. The first hurdle, simply being able to access higher education, is high for working-class people.

But let’s say you’ve made it. You’ve resigned yourself to the debt, and you’re in. Now you have to find somewhere to live.

According to figures in the *Telegraph*, the average weekly rent for students in London is £108.03. The *Financial Times* reports even higher figures: an average of £190 in London, £124 in Leeds, £119 in Manchester, £115 in Birmingham, and £114 in Nottingham. The *Telegraph* reports student rent averages of over £90 per week in Norwich, Exeter, and Cambridge.

Face it: you’re not going to afford to live unless you have an income. You’d better get a job. But according to figures published in *Metro*, the average student can only make £3,000 a year by working part-time and in holidays, while the average yearly outgoing is £17,482 in London and £16,279 elsewhere. The majority of working stu-

dents find work in service, retail, catering, and hospitality sector jobs where low pay, long hours, and casualisation are endemic.

But you’ll do your best. You’ll work the killer shifts behind the bar, in the coffee shop, or in the Students Union, and then drag yourself to class. Or will you? A study from May 2012 showed that the average undergraduate spends more time studying alone now than they did six years ago.

CUTS

Due to funding cuts and job losses, you shouldn’t expect to spend more than 13 hours a week with teachers (in lectures or seminars).

If you’re studying at a newer university, you’ll be lucky to get 12 hours.

But at least, during the time you’re studying, you’ll be in control. At least then you’ll be able to explore and develop. Right? Well, sort of.

If you’re studying a science or engineering degree, then it’s possible your department has a relationship with a multinational corporation.

At the University of Sheffield, you could be lucky enough to study in the BAE Systems Centre for Research in Active Control. Relationships like this mean that an arms company, a pharmaceutical company, or some other worker-exploiting, planet-scorching giant could have hand in the design of your curriculum. Are you learning in order to develop your own creative and critical faculties, or are you “learning” to meet the needs of big business and better mould you to fit into the workplace?

Courses at what are clearly intended to be the second tier of institutions are even more explicitly workplace-focused. “Vocational” degrees like Leisure and Tourism Management or Hospitality and Catering are little more than training for your life at work, without even the pretence of learning for its own sake. Your degree is now simply preparation for junior-supervisory or middle-management roles in industries

where exploitation is rife... like those where you’ll have to work in while at university to support yourself through your studies.

In Humanities courses, an ideological regime of aggressive post-modernism, or quasi-post-modernism, is hegemonic. “Grand narrative” theories of history, like Marxism, are dismissed as outdated and reactionary. Only nebulous, amorphous approaches based on never-quite-pinned-down analyses of “discourse” are allowed. And you’ll probably be encouraged to rely on “readers” and anthologies rather than actually tackling potentially difficult source material yourself.

So, let’s recap. You’re coughing up £9,000 a year, plus astronomical rents, to spend little time with teachers, studying courses designed to render you pliant workplace-fodder, and getting shat on in some low-wage job the whole time because that’s the only way you can get by. You’re by no means sure of a job at the end of it.

That’s the university experience the government wants you to have. But, while you can’t wish the reality of fees and cuts out of existence, you can carve out a different experience for yourself.

And it starts by seeing yourself, as a student and a worker (or future worker), as part of a class struggle. Not as a passive victim, but as an active political agent. You can choose to fight back against the fees regime, against low pay, against high rents, against the control of your curriculum by big business.

Supporters of the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts all over Britain are organising activist groups on campus to take the fight to government and higher education bosses on a variety of different fronts. Whether it’s fighting against a local cut on your campus, acting in solidarity with the struggles of academic and non-academic workers at your university, organising with other working students to fight for your rights in the workplace, or participating

in national mobilisations like the NCAFC’s radical bloc on the National Union of Students’ 21 November demonstration, you’ve got three years of action ahead of you that can give you a different way of looking at the world. You’ve felt the attacks, but by getting involved in campaigning you can feel the resistance, too.

And active political engagement doesn’t just mean headless-chicken activism, running around building for the next demo or activism. Involvement in campaigns like the NCAFC, and in socialist groups like Workers’ Liberty, should also provide a space for mutual and self-education, where you can get a different, or expanded, take on ideas.

HISTORIES

You can learn and read about the histories and ideas your under-staffed, under-resourced department can’t teach you (or won’t teach you, because those setting the curriculum don’t want you to learn it).

And you can develop your creative and critical faculties in order to help you better engage with the world around you, simply for the sake of doing so, rather than because it’ll make you a more attractive commodity for prospective employers.

This isn’t about prefiguration. Being an activist at university doesn’t give you the keys to a magical utopia where you can seal yourself off from the attacks, the pressures, and the sheer bullshit that uni bosses and the government are subjecting you to. Most of the struggles you’ll get involved in will be difficult and hard-fought, and you’ll almost certainly lose some of them. And becoming a well-read, cultured, committed revolutionary militant isn’t going to make your degree any cheaper.

But it can change the way you experience your time at university.

Class-struggle activism can provide a space where you can learn, explore, develop, and fight for control over your destiny.

A half-victory at London Met

By Ed Maltby

On Friday 21 September a preliminary hearing took place at the Royal Courts of Justice about the UK Border Agency (UKBA)’s move to revoke London Metropolitan University’s license to bring in international students (Highly Trusted Status, HTS).

The revocation could have led to the expulsion and deportation of around 2,600 international students.

The hearing offered temporary relief to international students who had already started their courses. However, students who had been offered places at London Met this year and hadn’t started their courses yet are still in limbo.

A judicial review is underway. If London Met is successful, it could get its HTS back. According to left-wing education expert Andrew McGettigan, the Government has said that they will appeal if the UKBA’s actions are found to be unlawful.

Under the marketised, fee-paying regime, international students are important cash-cows for universities. If a university cannot attract enough international students, it cannot fund itself.

If the court upholds the UKBA’s decision, London Met will be unable to fund itself for long and a buy-out is likely, according to McGettigan. The bought-out institution would be able to re-apply for HTS six months down

the line.

The hearing brought several facts to light about the way the government is acting. The decision to revoke London Met’s HTS was not a routine matter, but a decision taken personally by Theresa May, who is obsessed with reducing the figures for immigration. The decision appears to mark a U-turn by the UKBA. In April the UKBA said that London Met was good enough to sponsor 5,000 international students attending the London School of Business and Finance. A few weeks after that, London Met’s HTS was revoked.

This backdrop is a situation where all immigrants, including international students, are treated as semi-criminals. In Higher Education, international students are tightly monitored by university administrations, to the point where many are afraid to take a day off lectures if they fall sick.

These restrictions, on migrants and international students alike, must end!

Universities should not treat students like cash cows – they should be funded by taxing the rich and big business and seizing the wealth of the banks.

The student movement should campaign to stop the sell-off of London Met, and to protect international students at London Met and elsewhere from further crack downs and political game-playing.

International round-up

Portugal

Mass protests in Portugal have forced the right-wing government to back off from one of its plans for meeting debt bail-out conditions.

The government wanted to increase workers’ social security contributions by 7% and cut bosses’ contributions by 5.75%. The effect would be a 7% cut in net pay, mostly to the benefit of the bosses.

On 24 September prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho said he would abandon the plan.

South Africa

The miners’ strike in Marikana has ended with striking workers accepting a 22% pay increase.

The dispute – during

which 34 miners were massacred by police – was a product of increasing disillusion with the National Union of Miners bureaucracy’s moderation on wage issues. The breakaway AMCU union was able to capitalise by calling for a walkout demanding significant wage rises across the board and was able to grow by 19% in less than a month.

Chicago

The Chicago Teachers Union called off its seven-day strike on Tuesday 18 September.

It secured concessions from the city over job security and teacher evaluation, as well as defeating the plan to introduce performance-related “merit pay”.

The CTU has become increasingly influenced by the militant Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE). This was its first strike since 1987.

Downturn: crisis or opportunity?



Dave Osler

It's not often that words of the boss of a £25 billion fund management outfit invoke obvious parallels with the perspectives documents of a certain orthodox Trotskyist outfit once notorious for its regular predictions that calamity-inducing economic crisis is just round the corner.

But Hermes chief executive Saker Nusseibeh, the man who handles the money owned by the BT pension fund and numerous other investors, is deeply concerned about the prospects for the system he favours.

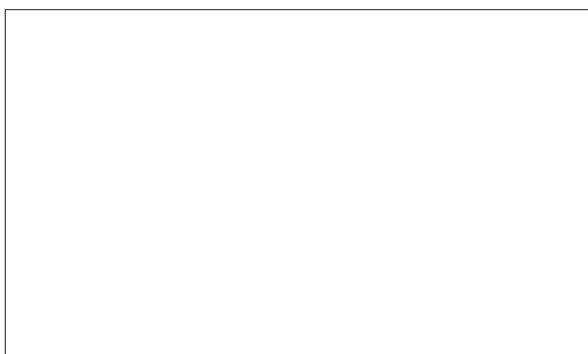
"It looks like the era of great economic growth that was started in the Reagan/Thatcher period is over and that anaemic growth is going to go on for some time. The wealth pie will be getting smaller and that raises questions about the division between capital and labour," he recently told the *Financial Times*.

As a result, he foresees lots of bad stuff not too far down the line, including a new Cold War between China and the US, a resurgence of economic nationalism in Europe reminiscent of the run-up to world war one, high food prices, chronic unemployment and social unrest that could topple over into civil wars across the continent.

Blimey. All that was lacking was a call to build the Workers Revolutionary Party as the British Section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and you could have taken his outburst straight from an editorial in the *News Line*, circa 1981.

But Mr Nusseibeh wasn't particularly concerned about the impact all of this might have on real flesh and blood human beings. No mention of any of that.

Instead, we were cautioned that these developments would represent negative news for equities, bonds and commodities alike. In the world that leading fund managers in-



habit, that must just about define the meaning of the phrase "worst case scenario".

I guess it was the sheer gravity of his outlook — which can be found in a story titled "Politics a big risk, warns Hermes", printed on September 16 and still available online, if you are interested — that took me slightly aback.

Like all Marxists, I am hopeful that economic downturn could act as a catalyst for a revitalised labour movement, placing socialist transformation back on the agenda in the advanced capitalist countries. But revolution is one thing, famine and civil war another.

PUBLICATION

Not only that, but I was also struck by the publication in which the remarks were published. Articles in the FT's discussion pages since the collapse of Lehman Brothers four years ago have usually been characterised by a distinct sobriety.

The pink broadsheet of course recognises that "capitalism is in crisis", and famously gave that strap line to a series of opinion pieces earlier this year.

Only the more gloomy investment banking heavyweights, academics and finance ministers have argued that we are in for a period of extended stagnation, comparable to that which beset the Japanese economy in the 1990s.

The more optimistic among them reckon that things may

well perk up in a year or two, provided that either Keynesian or free market economic prescriptions — delete as appropriate — are rigorously applied.

But so far only Nusseibeh has come anywhere near to adumbrating anything like the coming collapse of capitalism. Normally that is a job for the more alarmist constituents of the Trot left, some of which have cried wolf so often that their tendency to do come rain or come shine has been awarded the nickname of "catastrophism" by more reality-based comrades.

To some extent, the catastrophists can even claim scriptural authority. Back in 1938, Trotsky himself wrote in stark terms about the "death agony of capitalism", and however valid that projection might have looked to contemporaries, some 74 years later capitalism is very much still with us.

Rhetoric of this nature, in Britain at least, has been substantially toned down in recent decades. As capitalism underwent one of the most sustained spurts of expansion it has known since its inception as a mode of production, the idea that the show was coming off the road in short order proved rather harder to sustain.

Even so, many Marxist economists have maintained the more subtle subtext that despite all apparent evidence to the contrary, capitalism has been in permanent structural decline since the 1970s, buttressing the contention with figures purporting to show a continuing fall in the rate of profit.

Given the incorporation of the former bureaucratic collectivist economies into the global economy and the industrialisation of much of the former third world, such analysis long seemed to me to fly in the face of available evidence.

Even now, I see no good arguments for definitively excluding the possibility that capitalism will experience a renewed round of accumulation, especially if the depoliticisation of first world labour movements allows the ruling class to force through a dramatic reduction in the standards of living of the first world working class.

On the other hand, the opportunities for repoliticisation seem to me to be at the highest they have been in my entire adult life. Maybe Mr Nusseibeh and the residual clique of Healyites that have peddled the WRP stance for decades really are on to something after all.



Letters

Abolish school exams!

My experience with a school system which has no (or almost no) public exams — in Queensland, Australia — encourages me in the view that Patrick Yarker (*Solidarity* 257) is right to oppose school exams.

In Queensland you can leave school in year 10, with a statement from the school, based on continuous assessment, of what you've learned, or you can continue to year 12.

At the end of year 12 students are graded for admission to universities on the basis of continuous assessment within schools. The one public exam, the Queensland Core Skills test, is used not to grade individuals, but to calibrate school subject cohorts relative to each other.

There are still exams within schools. Although students are not constantly told "you're on level such-and-such", as they are in English schools, they will know that they usually score C or A or D or whatever. Exam blight is still there, and there are many other things wrong with the system. But exam blight is reduced.

There is no "teaching to the test". There is less time spent on revision. There is less time spent drilling students to do things mechanically in the exam when we know they don't understand the concepts and won't retain them.

There is no streaming. Failure is much less definitive. If you do badly in year 10 — well, you may do better in year 11. It is not like failing your GCSEs.

Tests or assessments of whether we are qualified for jobs are fair enough.

But exams in schools are a very different matter. They are not done to test suitability for useful work. In fact, scarcely any final university exam qualifies anyone for any job. At best it qualifies them to train for a job.

Exams in schools are devices to structure schooling so that its main "lesson" to most students is that they are failures. Not just that they have failed — we all fail at things; socialism will not abolish disappointment and frustration — but that they *are* failures.

They are filters to exclude students from going further in education. They are engines against learning.

The education system functions for capitalist employers mainly as a way of testing young people's ability to jump through hoops. Good A levels and a good university degree

will help you towards many jobs, because, regardless of whether the exam is in Aramaic or Zoology, the degree shows you can jump through exam-hoops.

The expansion of university education has, paradoxically, reduced social mobility. Before the late 1960s many young people from well-off families didn't go to university. Few jobs required degrees. A young person from a poor family could gain skills and promotion at work without hitting the barrier which now reserves most well-paid jobs for graduates *irrespective of whether the subject they graduated in has anything to do with the job.*

We need assessment in schools? In one teaching contract in Queensland I was allowed to do end-of-year assessment for a class without any sort of exam. It was a year 9 maths bottom set. (Setting is rare in Queensland, but more common in maths than in other subjects, and often done by separating off a "top" set and a "bottom" set, and leaving all the other sets mixed).

I had the class working on a range of activities, each student at her or his own pace, though usually helping each other. I assessed them by reporting how far they'd progressed on the spectrum of activities. It was less chancy and more humane than giving them an exam. It also helped to identify at least three students who were capable of and interested in doing much more serious maths.

Why can't we do that for all school assessment? Exams should be reserved for checking qualifications for jobs where an unqualified worker will harm others (not just brain surgeons and pilots). And their results should be just "qualified" or "not yet qualified".

Martin Thomas, Islington

Assange: the wrong question

Paul Field, Mark Osborn, and Andy Forse (*Solidarity* 254-7) are all, I think, asking the wrong question about the Assange case.

It is not the job of AWL, or the left in general, to be an adviser to Assange. Would he be more at risk of extradition to the USA in Sweden? Maybe. We shouldn't pretend to be legal experts who can assure him not.

Is he using Sweden's extradition bid as a way to get more resonance for the demand for assurances against extradition to the USA? Maybe, and if so good luck to him. Has he just panicked? I don't know.

Our concern is the politics. In political action, rather than amateur legal advice, there are two ways of dealing with the rights of the women who have brought charges against Assange, and the defence of Assange against whatever ploy US

government lawyers may devise in order to extradite him (they haven't found one yet).

Either the Ecuadorean embassy expels him. Or the Swedish government gives assurances that it won't extradite Assange over WikiLeaks.

If Assange evades US government retribution for WikiLeaks that is a blow to US global bullying, an encouragement to others to blow whistles. If the USA gets him, then that is a frightener for future whistle-blowers.

CIA renditions, Guantanamo, Homeland Security — shouldn't that convince us to demand the Swedish government gives assurances?

If the Ecuadorean embassy does not expel Assange, and so he evades the Swedish courts, that has no broader political implications of diminishing women's rights, or saying that men should get away with rape, or that rape charges should be taken lightly.

No such implications will flow from the idea that you can escape the courts by... opting for indefinite house-arrest in the Ecuadorean embassy.

Is Assange scared because he thinks that US agencies pumped up the charges, or put pressure on the women, or on Swedish prosecutors, or on Swedish courts? Maybe.

We can (and should) uphold the women's right to have their charges heard; we should reject attitudes like those of Naomi Wolf, or Alan Woods of Socialist Appeal, who claim somehow to *know* that the charges are CIA concoctions.

But we would be foolish to assume that such US intervention is impossible. And we should equally reject attitudes like that of the International Socialist Group (Scotland), which tells us it *knows*, without need for trial or hearing a defence plea, that Assange is guilty of rape.

If Assange were a figure in the left or the labour movement, then "Assange should go to Sweden" *might* have political meaning — something like: "Our movement shouldn't be tarnished by these unresolved charges — we demand Assange clear himself in court, even if that means risk of extradition to the USA; and if he doesn't, dissociate from him".

Assange is admired by some people around the left or on the left. But he has never claimed to be in the left or in the labour movement. We defend him against retribution by the USA not because he is one of us, but because he has blown the whistle on US misdeeds.

Socialist Worker, *The Socialist*, the Labour Left, Counterfire, and even major sections of George Galloway's own Respect group, have all stressed (with differences of detail and tone) that the rape charges against Assange should not be dismissed.

There's something of a left consensus on that, and rightly so. There should also be a loud left consensus to demand the Swedish government give assurances.

Colin Foster, London

Labour: reverse the NHS cuts!

According to the Royal College of Physicians, acute hospitals are on the point of collapse. Emergency admissions have increased 37% in the last decade, but hospitals have a third fewer beds than 25 years ago.

For a while the decrease in beds was matched by a shortening of patients' stays in hospital, but that trend is now in reverse. Older patients are coming into hospital with more complex conditions and are staying longer.

Meanwhile the Tories plan £20 billion cuts by 2014-5, and £50 billion by 2019-20.

The Tories' Health and Social Care Act, passed despite wide protest in March, will make things worse. When the NHS was run as an integrated public service, administration costs were just 6% of total health spending, and costs and risks were shared throughout the system.

When rational planning was replaced by the internal market in 1990-2010, administration costs rocketed to around 15%. Health economists expect that further marketisation and privatisation under the Health and Social Care Act will increase bureaucratic overheads by a further 30% or 50%.

And worse. Dr Mark Porter, the new chair of the British Medical Association's council, has told the *Guardian* that current policy is "morally wrong" and will threaten people's health or lives because they will no longer be able to get treatment.

"Bits of the NHS are being parcelled off and taken out of the NHS offer year by year... there's lots of areas where bits of the NHS have been taken out of the offer... It's no longer a comprehensive service. We can see the effect of people to whom we have to say: I'm sorry, this treatment is no longer

Scrap PFI!

According to the *Financial Times* (25 September), in late October the coalition government will announce a "remodelled version" of the Blair government's Private Finance Initiative (PFI), "with only minor changes".

PFI meant that private companies put up the cash to build new hospitals and schools in return for a lavish payback over the years to cover the initial outlay, a return on capital, and maintenance costs, which the private companies can inflate more or less at will.

The total of pledged paybacks now reaches £122 billion, and PFI commitments are crippling a number of hospitals.

Margaret Hodge, former Labour minister and now chair of the parliamentary public accounts committee, complained that "all the problems with the old PFI such as the lack of real risk transfer, large private profits, and a lack of transparency" would remain.

It is a pity that she and other New Labour ministers did not recognise those problems when they used PFI. Unions and local Labour Parties should fight to commit Labour to cancel PFI schemes and end their drain on public services.

Labour-controlled Ealing council and Tory(!)-controlled Hammersmith have built a high profile campaign against local hospital closures. Labour needs to summon up similar political energy on a national level.

available."

NHS hospitals, as Porter has previously pointed out, will be reduced to an "increasingly tattered safety-net" for patients with difficult, long-term, but common illnesses like diabetes 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.

In September 2012, a survey commissioned by private firm BFI Healthcare reported that 70% of GPs questioned have denied at least one patient elective surgery in the last month. This treatment rationing is driving a private sector boom as patients opt to pay rather wait in pain and discomfort. BUPA have announced there is now "huge demand for operations like cataract, hernias and hip and knee replacements".

BROKEN

The new Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is on record as saying: "the NHS would be better off broken up into an insurance based system... The poor and unemployed should have their contributions supplemented or paid for by the state".

Shadow health minister Jamie Reed has rightly criticised Jeremy Hunt for seeking to hire Christine Lineen, former head of communications at Circle Healthcare, as his special advisor. Circle paid Andrew Lansley £21,000 to fund his private office when in opposition, and has since become the first private company to take over an NHS hospital, at Hinchingsbrooke.

Reed said "The whole country should be worried by the cosy relationship between the Tories and private healthcare — there is clearly a revolving door between them and it leads right to the heart of government."

The National Policy Forum report presented to Labour Party conference 2012, starting in Manchester on 30 September, rightly pledges that a Labour government will repeal the Health and Social Care Act.

But that pledge is not enough. Andy Burnham has quali-

fied Labour's commitment on the Health and Social Care Act (HSCA) by saying that he wants to avoid any "top-down reorganisation", i.e. by suggesting that the Tories' reorganisation will be left to stand under a new "HSCA-lite" regime. Labour must restore the NHS as a public service.

Ed Miliband has said that he is in favour of GP-led commissioning, the cornerstone of the HSCA.

Labour must also pledge to reverse the cuts, which even aside from the HSCA are worse than anything Margaret Thatcher did to the NHS. A lot of the money could be found by bringing all outsourced NHS staff back in house and abolishing the internal market and replacing it with a system of block grants and rational planning.

The rest? Tax the rich! In this crisis, the wealthy are becoming even wealthier. Luxury houses are currently under construction in London, at an average tag of £2.5 million each, to a total value of £38 billion. Tax those billions!

The NHS was founded in a time of even greater economic stress than now. Labour can restore it now — if the movement summons up the political will.

Circle Holdings = Tory millionaires

Four of the key people behind Circle Holdings, the private company running Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, have between them donated £1,410,928 to the Conservative Party.

This scandal has been uncovered by Dr Eoin Clarke in his "The Green Benches" blog. The money came from Lansdowne Partners CEO Paul Ruddock (£630,000), Odey Asset Management CEO Crispin Odey (£242,000), Invesco Perpetual former director Martyn Arbib (£413,000), and Bluecrest founder Michael Platt (£125,000).

The four companies concerned own 81% of the shares in Circle Holdings, which is based in an offshore tax haven.

Break from the New Labour record!

When public services are privatised it is often presented as the inevitable march of history. However, there was nothing inevitable about NHS privatisation. It was pushed through deliberately — and in large part by New Labour.

The 1997-2010 Labour administration increased NHS funding at a faster rate than any previous government. When Labour came to power in 1997, total NHS spending accounted for 5.3% of GDP, or £44 billion a year. By 2010, total NHS spending was 8% of GDP, or £117 billion.

But under the shine of the new hospitals, the canker of privatisation was being spread.

Under New Labour, individuals like Mark Britnell (KPMG), Paul Jones (Atos) and Penny Dash (Boston Consulting/PwC) occupied strategic positions in the Department of Health. Both Patricia Hewitt and Alan Milburn were rewarded by jobs with private health firms after their time in office.

New Labour pushed again and again to find openings for the relatively inefficient private sector. Those attempts were to some extent masked from public scrutiny by substantial increases to NHS funding.

The Thatcher government had already outsourced non-clinical work, and multi-national corporations were able to cream off profits for portering, cleaning, catering and maintenance. Alan Milburn first introduced the private sector

into core clinical work. In November 2000 Milburn signed a concordat with the private sector agreeing that NHS patients could be treated in private hospitals.

Having lobbied hard for that concordat, private firms soon found they were unable to perform treatments at NHS prices. The privatisers then hit on the idea of hiving off a section of planned, low risk, routine operations at favourable rates.

In 2008 Independent Sector Treatment Centres (ISTCs) were performing just 2% of the 8.6 million elective operations carried out every year in the NHS; they were paid not for operations performed but for those contracted for.

BILLIONS

A King's Fund report from 2008 said that ISTCs were performing just 85% of treatments and 25% of diagnostics that they were paid for. Over a period of five years that initiative cost £5.6 billion.

New Labour also pushed the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). PFI was originally proposed by the Major government in the early 1990s. The idea was that consortia of banks, private equity capitalists, and construction and maintenance companies, would put up cash to build public service premises, like hospitals, then own and maintain them and lease them back to the public sector. The contracts would work like massive hire-purchase schemes spanning 30 years or

more.

PFI is an expensive accounting trick. A national government can borrow money at much lower rates than the private sector, and direct state investment avoids the need to pay legal fees and administrative costs. In exchange for allowing government to hide the size of the national debt, the taxpayer paid way over the odds for the buildings.

During Labour's time in office £11.4 billion of PFI money was spent on building new hospitals. Recent projections are that the bill will total £70 billion and not be paid off until 2049.

New Labour health minister Alan Milburn once boasted that PFI allowed Labour to lead "the biggest hospital building programme the NHS has ever seen". Now PFI may well become a major factor in the biggest hospital closure programme the NHS has ever seen.

South London Healthcare Trust is the first NHS hospital trust to be placed under the control of a special administrator as it struggles to pay the bill to its PFI masters. South London Healthcare Trust has some of the best mortality rates in the country and recently made it to the finals of the *Health Service Journal's* Efficiency Awards. But the government has stepped in to ensure the needs of private investors are prioritised over the needs of patients.

The Department of Health expects another 20-30 hospital trusts to follow a similar path due to extortionate PFI repayments.



Libya: defeating the Salafists

By Martyn Hudson

The attack and killings at the US consulate in Benghazi — killings orchestrated ostensibly around the protest against the *Innocence of Muslims* film — were, in reality it seems, long-planned.

Many in Benghazi saw it as a reprisal attack for the US drone killing of a high-ranking Libyan al-Qaeda operative in Afghanistan.

The attacks were widely seen as the work of Ansar al-Sharia, a recently emerging hardline Salafist grouping who have some support in eastern Libya and Benghazi specifically. They have been condemned for their attacks on Sufi shrines and the demolition of holy sites dedicated to Sufi saints. The long tradition of Sufism in Libya is seen as heretical by the Islamists and it echoes the destruction of Sufi sites in other parts of Africa such as Mali and Niger.

The interim leader of Libya, Mohammed Magarief, has condemned the attacks and has initiated a more robust project to dismantle the independent militias in the country, including the Abu Slim brigade, who recently downed arms and abdicated their power base in Derna. The renunciation of the power of the militias and the demilitarisation of the country is vastly popular in Libya with one poll indicating that 95% of the population supports such policies.

In the aftermath of the killing of the US consul 30,000 protestors gathered to expel Ansar al-Sharia from Benghazi and chanted slogans against terrorism and Salafism such as “You terrorists, you cowards. Go back to Afghanistan!”

This is not just a rhetorical gesture of outrage. Since the early 1980s the Salafists, backed by the Saudi dictatorship, have been importing their own cadre into mosques and schools throughout North Africa. Largely unsuccessful in Libya, where Qaddafi’s brutal security services largely physically liquidated the Islamists, it was more successful in Algeria, where Salafists, many of whom had fought against the Russians in Afghanistan, became the central ideological and military backbone of the Islamic opposition.

The anger against the Islamists for their destruction of Sufi holy sites, the attacks on the consulate and for attacks on ordinary Libyan citizens has for many been focused towards a positive programme of freedom of expression if not outright secularism. It is secularism that Ansar al-Sharia most fears. Its leader Mohammed Ali al-Zahawi has called for Islamists to do battle not just against Qaddafi loyalists but against the “liberals and secularists”.

The vicious Salafist international has been booted out of Benghazi at the hands of ordinary protestors who condemn their intimidation and violence.

This makes a mockery of the Sharia socialists who side with them against working-class organisation and social and sexual liberty in Cairo, Bradford, and in Benghazi itself.

How to defend f

By Yves Coleman

“If you insult Muhammad, it is as if you insult my own mother.”
(A participant in a debate on Radio Tropic FM, 20 September, 2012.)

It all began with excerpts from a stupid video posted on the internet.

Then a French satirical weekly, *Charlie Hebdo*, intervened. This weekly publication has always been characterised by its bad taste, its rude, populist machismo, and its cheap, pseudo anti-racism.

This typically French form of pseudo anti-racism has a peculiarity: it conveys all racist or anti-Semitic clichés under the pretext of attacking... racism! This position makes its “humour” often perfectly acceptable to extreme right wingers.

One example is the cover of the latest *Charlie Hebdo*. It shows an orthodox Jewish man with a traditional hat pushing a Muslim (or Muhammad?) in a wheelchair, with the subtitle “Untouchables”. That is also the title of a successful French film, which was supposedly anti-racist.

At one level this cartoon encourages the reader to think that Jews and Muslims are exempt from criticism in France, which obviously implies that:

- Catholics (culturally dominant in France) are much more tolerant than adherents of the other two Abrahamic religions;
- French Jews, even though they are a small minority, form a powerful “lobby” (a thought which was also expressed by the Tropic FM “Muslim” listener quoted at the beginning of this article);
- “Muslims” have installed a reign of terror in France through their intellectual terrorism, their physical threats, or even attacks.

JUMPED

In fact, *Charlie Hebdo* has only jumped on the opportunity presented by the furore around *The Innocence of Muslims* to reinforce the “critical” current which tends to present all Muslims as fanatics or terrorists.

Fifteen years ago, the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* was considered by the anti-globalisation left as a rare example of the “free press” (according to Serge Halimi, director of the left anti-globalisation monthly *Le Monde diplomatique*).

When this weekly came under the leadership of a former stand-up comedian and playwright (Philippe Val), who became a vulgar court philosopher close to Sarkozy, of course radicals and left-wingers decided the publication was no longer trendy. And especially because a reformist feminist,, Caroline Fourest, started writing in *Charlie Hebdo*, criticising all religions, all fundamentalisms, including Islamic fundamentalism and therefore criticising Tariq Ramadan, who was for a while an icon of the left and anti-globalisation movement.

In 2008, anti-Semitic “jokes” made by the cartoonist Maurice Sinet (aka Siné, who had a long record of anti-Semitic remarks) allowed a false debate to take place between Siné supporters (supposed to be left and far-left minded) and Philippe Val supporters or *Charlie Hebdo* readers, supposed to be all Sarkozy-ists and “Islamophobes”.

The terms of the debate were fake, because neither of the two camps really opposed both anti-Semitism (including when presented as reactionary anti-Zionism) and anti-Arab racism, even when it was concealed under a secularist criticism of Islam.

Eventually, Siné was sacked from *Charlie Hebdo* and created his own satirical monthly. Val was appointed to manage a public radio station, where he soon distinguished himself by firing two anti-Sarkozy stand-up comedians (Didier Porte and Stephane Guillon), and *Charlie Hebdo* continued its muddled comments on all kinds of subjects.

It is obvious that the latest issue of *Charlie Hebdo* devoted to caricatures of Muhammad or of Muslims (their previous issue with similar content, around the time of the “Danish cartoons” scandal in 2006, provoked arson attacks on its office as well as several trials for “Islamophobia”) had only one main objective: to sell more copies, taking advantage of

the atmosphere created by the reactions to *The Innocence of Muslims*. “Freedom of speech” had nothing to do with this provocation.

In addition, we know that, during recent years, in France as well as in Europe more widely, the extreme right hides its fascist and racist ideas under the banner of the freedom of expression, and a critique of “political correctness gone mad”. So we must be conscious that freedom of expression often becomes a much adulterated commodity in certain hands.

At the same time, a tiny number of Muslims have fallen into the trap. They wanted to organise demonstrations, all banned by the “socialist” government.

For her part, Marine Le Pen, the new leader of the fascist National Front, took the opportunity to call for a ban on hi-jabs and yarmulkes on the streets.

FALSE DEBATE

In short, a new false debate was launched by the media, amplified by radio and community media, where we were required to take stands: either on the side of all “Muslims”, whatever their political orientation, or the side of *Charlie Hebdo*, supposedly the main voice of the “Islamophobic” left.

But there is a plethora of more important matters to discuss than the rights and wrongs of publishing cartoons of a prophet-warrior who died 15 centuries ago.

The wave of layoffs, rising unemployment, lack of teachers in schools, repression against undocumented migrants, clampdowns against benefit claimants, speed-ups and an increase in workplace accidents, increase of suicides related to the deterioration of working conditions, harassment organised by foremen and bosses, etc., all these topics deserve hundreds of articles, dozens of radio and TV programmes, and thousands of discussions.

But the media prefer to organise false debates with their audiences or with confused Islamophile or Islamophobic intellectuals, almost never inviting atheists or rationalists to express their views, to discuss the only topic of interest for them: “freedom of expression”.

The opinion expressed by the listener whose quote begins this article, and many other views expressed on the net, are perfect examples of the current ideological confusion.

Personal insults against individuals are dealt with within the frame of bourgeois justice. People who are insulted can complain if they feel defamed. And there is an entire legal arsenal for this purpose. There is no need to add more laws.

You can also use a quick solution, as seemed to be implied by the quoted listener (i.e., to smash the face of the person who insulted your mother or religion) but is this really the best solution?

Finally, one can imagine how it could work in another society, where in the neighbourhoods, in the schools, or workplaces, general assemblies — committees of residents or workers — would meet to resolve such disputes without going by judges and lawyers ... But this would imply that participants agree to settle their dispute by accepting a collective, non-violent solution.

Freedom of expression, contrary to what the Tropic FM listener believes, has nothing to do with a trivial personal insult. Freedom of expression depends on a fragile collection of collective rights that regulate all media, from a simple leaflet to a TV programme, newspaper or book, but also the right to protest and organise. Collective rights which have been won by decades of struggle, including workers’ struggles.

This freedom of expression is reduced to a minimum in the western world, not because of some protests by fundamentalist Muslims or some Islamist attacks, but because of the mighty power of capitalists. The banking, finance, and industry magnates who control the media rarely encourage freedom of expression. And the words of workers, unemployed, and exploited people are almost never heard, or filtered by journalists who carefully respect the interests of their masters.

The situation is also not much better in the so-called left parties or large unions.

It is well known how the French Communist Party defamed (including by shopping them to the bosses) and phys-

Freedom of expression

Above left: A demonstration in Pakistan. Above right: The publishing director of *Charlie Hebdo* with the “offending” issue

ically beat up hundreds of Trotskyist and anarchist activists for decades. And that is when the Stalinists did not simply murder them, as they did under the German Occupation, under Stalinism in the Eastern bloc, or during the Spanish Civil War.

We know that the ruling French Socialist Party gives power and freedom of speech only to individuals coming from the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie.

REFLECTED

This is reflected in the media outlets which are linked to this party, in the social composition of its MPs, Senators and Ministers, in its current implementation of austerity, in its anti-immigrant policies carried out under the previous government, its support for the police force, French armed interventions abroad, etc.

We know that the unions muzzle speech and freedom of action by workers hostile to their bureaucracies.

We also know how the small pseudo left-wing and anti-imperialist group called “The Indigenous of the Republic”, with the help of some intellectuals (Said Bouamama and Pierre Tevanian), recently prevented Caroline Fourest, a secular, anti-racist and reformist feminist from speaking (to criticise the National Front) at the Communist Party “fête” on 16 September 16, all in the name of anti-fascism and the fight against Islamophobia.

So let us be wary, too, about left groups who want — in the labour movement, trade unions, or in the street — to impose their ideas with clubs or fists whenever it suits them. Let us be wary of those who claim to defend freedom of expression, but are unable to practise it in their own unions, political organisations, and publications.

Some “Muslims” wanted to have both the right to express their indignation in the street against *Charlie Hebdo* and also to protest against *The Innocence of Muslims*. The French government has banned several demonstrations, and the few which have been organised have been spectacular failures (from one to 150 protesters), showing that the vast majority of “Muslims” did not fall into the trap, even if they were offended by the film or the magazine.

As a supporter of freedom of expression, I do not see why I should support any ban by the French state. These demonstrations should be allowed to proceed without being banned by the state, whatever one thinks of their dubious or reactionary political or religious content.

And activists should also have the right to protest against these demonstrations. It is symptomatic that the only “Muslim” demonstrator sentenced to prison after the 15 September demonstration has explained he carried a weapon to

defend himself against... Jews (a typical example of the delirious anti-Semitism inspired by Koranic anti-Judaism, fascist anti-Semitism, and extreme right anti-Zionism).

As a rationalist atheist, I do not see why I should support those who want to introduce in France a law against blasphemy, or limit the freedom of expression with regard to the criticism all religions, including Islam.

We know that the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (which includes 57 states), the United States, and the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations want France to adopt new laws against blasphemy. We know that French government is regularly criticised as “anti-religious” and “Islamophobic”, because of the laws against the headscarf or niqab.

SECULARISM

The French state uses secularism when it suits its interests for domestic policy issues, but it finances Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim groups in several French departments.

It maintains Catholic churches, and it finances private religious instruction throughout the country. We have no reason to support the French government but we must also oppose all those who would like to impose laws restricting criticism of religions, supposedly because it offends believers, God, or the prophets.

Similarly, without supporting a publicity-hungry newspaper like *Charlie Hebdo* in its quest for more sales at any price, I see no reason to support those who want to destroy its headquarters, or physically threaten its designers or journalists, or want them to be condemned by bourgeois justice because of their bad-taste blasphemies.

As an atheist, I can only oppose any law against blasphemy, and any restriction to the freedom to criticise religion. I will oppose any government — of the right or of the “left” — that wishes to impose such restrictions.

Meanwhile, we should also denounce anyone, including on the left, who is critical of one religion (Islam) while remaining silent about other religions, so they can present as progressive their anti-Arab racism, or their support for French (and other) interventions in Libya, Afghanistan, and Africa.

We must denounce Iran’s efforts to recover the initiative it lost since the Arab Spring. Iran, where a religious foundation linked to the regime immediately took advantage of the *The Innocence of Muslims* to increase the price on Salman Rushdie’s head.

We must denounce the National Front attempt to stir up hatred against Arabs, whether Muslim or not, and against

Jews, two elements of the National Front political patrimony.

Finally, we must denounce the obvious diversion organised by the media about these non-events. Several fascist groups, including L’Oeuvre Française (“French Work”) and Jeunesses Nationalistes (Nationalist Youth) have organised a “ride” to Paris with buses and a “nationalist rally” on 29 September, but the media have not shown any interest in this demo.

Yet the themes of the demonstration on the 29th should alert all those so-called advocates of freedom of expression. Promotional material for the event calls for a “general mobilisation of all the French patriots and nationalists.”

It calls on nationalist to demonstrate “against lawless areas, against the government’s anti-national policy, against anti-white racism: We want to be masters in our fatherland! Against immigration-invasion government hirelings, against the violation of our interests by US-Zionist and euro-globalist forces, against putting foreign interests first: let’s struggle to give France back to the French and become masters in our homeland!”

This disgusting prose is a significant example of the xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and fascistic form of anti-Zionism which flourish on the internet.

National, cultural, and religious identities are being promoted by states, churches and all sorts of fascist and populist demagogues. But neither Muslim nor non-Muslim workers lose their free will, intellectual independence and critical faculties just because they are exposed to vicious, hateful propaganda.

They have a choice: either they support their exploiters and their demagogic leaders who claim to share the same faith, or they unmask all the political uses of their beliefs.

And as atheists and non-believers, we must stand against all political elements — left-wing or right-wing, fascist, nationalist, and populist — which claim the political heritage of the Enlightenment to hide their reactionary beliefs.

* The term “Muslim” appears in quotation marks in this article, because journalists, demographers, sociologists and many radical, left-wing or anti-globalisation activists lazily use the religious label of “Muslim” for all those who come from countries where Islam is the state religion, or whose families practise Islam, or simply those whose names sound “Arabic”, as if there were no atheists among these so-called “Muslims”.

● Yves Coleman is a French revolutionary activist who is involved with the journal *Ni Patries, Ni Frontières* (No Fatherlands, No Borders).

China's new worker militants

By Camila Bassi

The Hong Kong based NGO and journal China Labour Bulletin (CLB) was set up in 1994. Its founder, a former railway worker, helped establish — during the 1989 Tiananmen Square revolutionary uprising — the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation. This was China's first, but short-lived, independent trade union.

In March this year CLB produced a report assessing the development of the workers' movement in China during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This article summarises the appraisal made in the report.

The phenomenal rate of growth in China's economy (an economy which surpassed Japan in 2011 to become the second largest in the world) was built, by and large, on the sweat and toil of an apparently unlimited supply of impoverished labour from the rural hinterland to the southern coastal areas. As this growth rate slowed, China witnessed a rise in working class organisation, strike action and protest.

The restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) during the late 1990s and early 2000s and the rapid proliferation of private enterprises has shaped the workers' movement in two key ways.

On the one hand, the previous guarantee of an "iron rice bowl" existence (a job, a home and welfare benefits) disappeared. While workers became unemployed, they observed their former bosses making money out of corrupt manipulation of the restructuring process (with, for instance, state assets being purchased at ludicrously low prices). One major focus of workers' protest in the early millennium then was over the restructuring process, specifically, redundancy payments, job relocations and corruption. The Liaoyang mass protest of 2002-2003, which involved up to 10,000 workers, is perhaps the most notable.

On the other hand, the early rampant growth of private enterprise signified the muscular dominance of capital over labour, with large-scale migration of rural residents to China's cities for work. A critical shift in demographics however has conditioned the nature of these workers' protests. The western media has notably referred to China's "demographic timebomb". As the *Guardian* reported this year:

"Life expectancy has soared in China, while fertility has plummeted due to strict birth control policies. In 2009 there were 167 million over-60s, about an eighth of the population. By 2050 there will be 480 million, while the number of young people will have fallen. [...] China's economic miracle has been fuelled by its 'demographic dividend': an unusually high proportion of working age citizens. That

Jalon Electronics "sleep in"

population bulge is becoming a problem as it ages. In 2000 there were six workers for every over-60. By 2030, there will be barely two."

Labour shortages, first apparent in 2004, then easing during the 2008-2009 capitalist crisis, were, by the end of the decade, evident across China. Since 2004, not only have the number of workers' protests increased but so too have their demands evolved — from reactive, for example, against violations of labour rights, to proactive, such as demands for better wages and working conditions.

In the early 2000s workers' struggles were mostly in the manufacturing sector (at a time when growth was fuelled by export-led manufacturing delivered by low cost labour). During the decade, significant protests also took place in the education and transport sectors.

Take the case of community teachers, who had played a crucial role since the 1960s in China's localised schooling but were, in their millions, laid off in the early millennium. Throughout the decade, community teachers have petitioned government and protested.

Moreover, regular teachers, particularly in the poorer

provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi, Chongqing, Hubai and Hunan, have struck for pay parity with civil servants.

CLB observe a range of tactics used by the labour movement, from strikes (which are still the tactic of choice) to other creative actions. One interesting example is from June 2010.

Workers at Jalon Electronics in Xiamen staged a mass "sleep-in" to protest against new work quotas introduced after a 1 June pay increase. Workers said pay for an eight-hour shift had gone up from 30 yuan to 38 yuan but that the work quota had gone up from an already difficult 7,700 units of conductive adhesive to an impossible 9,000 units. The workload was so exhausting that workers said they had no option but to sleep at their stations.

In the context of an intensifying workers' movement, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has attempted to marry a so-called new Confucianism with capitalism. The result? The promotion of a "harmonious society"; this, in reality, has entailed only piecemeal reforms, such as lacklustre reform of the Hukou (household registration system), which fail in seriously addressing the exclusion of rural migrants and the exploitation of workers. As CLB notes: "...central government spending on the maintenance of stability reached 514 billion yuan in 2009, roughly equivalent to or even in excess of the country's annual expenditure on the military."

Nonetheless, workers' protests have continued to excavate, many centred on "anger at the rapidly increasing gaps between the rich and the poor and the powerful and the weak, processes seen as directly linked to government corruption and cronyism." Furthermore, the blackout in China's official media on workers' strikes and demonstrations is no longer possible, because of the rapid spread of the country's social media, which include, it is estimated, over 500 million netizens.

Whilst worker protests in the early 2000s predominantly involved laid-off workers from SOEs and rural migrants employed in the private sector, by the end of the decade a new group, or a "new generation", emerged. Those born in the 1980s and 1990s have altered the nature of the migrant worker to one younger, better educated, more connected, and with higher expectations and more willingness to take on proactive demands. This, along with the "demographic timebomb", CLB concludes, means that the workers' movement in China (although still transitory and fragmented) is politically advancing.

In a country hosting one in five of the world's population, a cause for hope and solidarity then.

• China Labour Bulletin: *A Decade of Change: The Workers' Movement in China 2000-2010*.

Zola's vision of socialism

By David Kirk

BBC1 has begun a film adaptation of one of Emile Zola's more neglected novels, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (sometimes translated as *The Ladies' Paradise*).

Quite a few people on the left will have read Zola's *Germinial* with its grimly realistic depiction of class struggle in the coalfields of northern France. Or *La Bête Humaine* and *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola's intense psychological thrillers obsessed with sex and death. Compared to these *The Ladies' Paradise* can seem like a slight work. It is often comedic, it has a happyish ending and the one notable death in the novel is played for black comedy rather than shock, realism or horror.

The story is set in an around a department store in Paris in the last years of the Napoleon II's Second Empire. This is the "Au Bonheur des Dames" of the title.

The vast new store is run by Octave Mouret, a obsessive and innovative retail tyrant. Mouret's great insight is that the sexual and gender repression which bourgeois women feel can find a momentary release through the fetishised experience of shopping.

Commodity fetishism is depicted as near-equivalent to erotic fetishism. Zola's description of the displays of silks, damasks, muslins and lace set up by Mouret in displays which look like the 19th century fantasy of oriental harems is deeply sexualised. There is much talk of the shoppers admiring the tactile qualities of the fabrics in a obsessive way. One woman becomes a compulsive shop-lifter because of her obsession with the store and its goods.

The hero of the book is Denise Baudu, an impoverished young woman from the provinces. At first she is working in her relatives' shop near the department store. This draper's shop, like all the other little shops, is being driven

out of business by Mouret's vast emporium. All the shop keepers rail against the new store.

But Denise can see the writing on the wall and does not share her relatives' hatred. She takes a job in the underwear section of *Au Bonheur des Dames*.

Zola's description of working life in the department store is vivid and recognisable today. There is snobbery, bullying and sexual harassment from management. There are snooty and rude customers. There is camaraderie among the workers. These women workers have a level of financial and social independence unknown for the vast majority of working-class women in 1860s France. They are more independent than their heavily corseted, dependent and idle clients.

Most 19th century novels would have shown how this vast new capitalist enterprise drove the small shop keepers out of business as a uniformly dreadful thing and side with them. Zola actually presents the going out of business of the small shops as a necessary and inevitable result of material progress. There is a blackly comic funeral of the last shop keeper in the district to hold out; he is literally killed by Mouret's endless expansion of the department store. All of the desiccated and broken shopkeepers come out to mourn the death of the petty bourgeoisie. Zola pities these traders but does not mourn their passing.

The novel is not an early advocacy of consumerism. Zola was informed by radical and socialist politics. He sided with the workers against capital. But his socialism was shifting and eclectic.

His main influence was the utopian socialist thinker Charles Fourier. Fourier was an early advocate of women's rights and even LGBT rights (in this he was in advance of Marx and Engels). Fourier, unlike Zola, was also a convinced anti Semite. And unlike Marx he did not see the

Les Grands Magasins, a 19th century department store in Paris

workers as the agency to bring the revolution about. He had a blueprint for the perfect society and hoped the French government would carry out his programme.

Zola sees in the large department stores and other big capitalist enterprises of his day the future basis for a classless socialist society. The camaraderie, the rough equality, the sexual freedom shown amongst the workers are to Zola what modern production allows us to achieve, only held back by the interests of profit, a corrupt government and a hidebound class system. Symbolically, at the end of the novel, shop-floor workers are beginning to take over the running of the store.

The BBC1 adaptation shifts the action to the north of England in the 1890s. I have no problem with this kind of transposition. You could even set the novel today without losing a lot of its meaning. However I do hope that the message, that a new society can be built out of the old and in the interests of the workers, is not lost.

Why we should not back US Democrats

With Mitt Romney's scorn for "the 47%", many left-minded people will conclude that they must support Barack Obama in the USA's presidential election in November.

The Democratic Party is firmly controlled by capitalist interests; Obama's administration has increased inequality in the USA; yet the TUC's pamphlet for 20 October sets up Obama's policies as a model for Britain. "USA shows the way".

When Franklin D Roosevelt was president, from 1933 until his death in 1945, and put through the "New Deal", the political gap between Democrats and Republicans in the USA was even wider than now.

The Communist Party and many trade-union leaders rallied to Roosevelt. The revolutionary socialists refused. They argued for the unions to form their own independent labour party.

They also proposed a socialist programme for that labour party; but even if the labour party at first had policies not much to the left of Roosevelt's - as the British Labour Party in its early days was in policy close to the Liberals - the beginnings of independent working-class political action would open socialist possibilities which the Democratic Party closed off.

This article by Max Shachtman from *Labor Action* of 9 November 1942 explains more. *Labor Action* was the paper of the Workers' Party, one side of a split in the US Trotskyist movement in 1940. The other side was the Socialist Workers Party, or "Cannonites".

The American Labor Party which the article refers to was not what its name suggests. It was an electoral apparatus set up in 1936 by trade-union leaders in New York state (only) to back Roosevelt's wing of the Democratic Party. It lasted to the early 1950s.

"Tammany Hall", in the article, signifies the Democratic Party machine in New York, notoriously corrupt.

At the very last minute, in *The Militant* of 31 October, the Socialist Workers Party issued a statement on the New York elections in which it argued for a policy of casting the working class vote for Dean Alfange, gubernatorial candidate of the American Labor Party in New York. [From their statement]

"In most of these elections (in the last few years) the ALP has found it necessary to nominate some candidates for minor offices independently of the capitalist parties. In every case where this has been done the SWP, making it clear that we oppose the program of the ALP, has given electoral support to such independent candidates while rejecting those candidates of the ALP who ran also as candidates of one or another of the bourgeois parties. The guiding line which determined our position in each case is our support of independent political action by the workers. There is no principle reason to change this position in the present election.

"To be sure, the miserable and treacherous leaders of the ALP find themselves conducting an independent campaign this year very much against their will. They are doing so only because the Democratic Party rejected their modest request that it nominate one bourgeois scoundrel (Mead) instead of another bourgeois scoundrel (Bennett), and because the sentiments of the workers forbid them to dissolve the the ALP at Roosevelt's command.

"But the reasons which prompt reformist labor leaders to sponsor an independent labor ticket are of no fundamental concern to us. Nor is the personality of the candidate the decisive question. Alfange, the candidate for governor, is a political adventurer from Tammany Hall. But he is no worse and no better than the other leading figures of the ALP. We do not distinguish between good and bad faker. What is important and decisive is the fact of an independent ticket nominated by a party based on trade unions. We don't support the leaders or their program. We support independent political action by the workers. For that reason and that reason only, we vote for the independent candidates of the ALP in the present election."

SHAME-FACED

As can be seen from this ample quotation the opportunists who wrote the statement are still pretty shame-faced about their policy.

They don't have the courage to come forward with the flat declaration "Vote for Alfange, representative of the idea of independent working class political action" - and therefore the statement is not really addressed to the workers in general. The Cannonite leaders have their own ranks to contend with first. That is why, as language and tone of the statement show, they are really addressing themselves to the members and the sympathizers of the SWP. That is whom they are trying to convince of their policy! That is

Roosevelt was not "our man"

why the statement is not forthright in tenor, but essentially polemical and defensive in tone. Against whom are they polemicalising? From whose criticisms are they defending themselves?

Now let us get to the question of the policy itself. It is quite permissible, given the state of the working class movement in this country, for a small revolutionary party, which is unable to put a ticket of its own in the field to upon the workers to vote for the candidates of another, non-revolutionary political party. But only under certain conditions.

First that the other party is based upon the labor movement in other words, that it is a working class and not a capitalist party

Secondly, that in calling upon workers to support it, the revolutionary party makes it perfectly clear that it criticizes the reformist character of the other party, of its program and its leadership since, in such cases (Labor Parties, Farmer-Labor Parties, etc) it is always a reformist party that is involved.

Thirdly, as most important of all, in each concrete case, voting for the reformist party ticket must serve this revolutionary end: it must contribute to bringing the workers into conflict, as a class, with the capitalist class and its political parties: it must serve to separate the workers, as a class, from the capitalists and their political parties and factions it must serve to heighten the class consciousness and feeling of solidarity of the workers. If, in the concrete, a vote for a reformist party does these things, even in the smallest substantial degree, it is proper for a revolutionary party to endorse the other party.

Failing to meet these conditions, a vote for another political party, even if it goes by the name of "Labor", is opportunistic, is a disavowal of revolutionary principle, is sometimes downright betrayal of socialism, and at all times in conflict with the best interests of the working class. The revolutionary socialist then frankly prefers not to vote at all, indifferent to the epithet "abstentionist!" because he is merely abstaining from playing capitalist politics. He confines himself to utilizing whatever interest there is in the elections to stimulate the interest and support of workers in the socialist program for which his revolutionary party stands.

OPPORTUNIST

Did the ALP ticket, or even the nomination of the "independent" candidate for Governor, in the New York State elections this year meet these conditions?

Did it, as the Cannonites say, represent "the idea of independent political action by the workers"? Is the Cannonite analysis of the ALP position correct? No, it is an opportunistic political deception through and through. Everybody seems to have understood the real situation, but not the leaders of the SWP.

When the Cannonites write that "the sentiments of the workers forbid them (the ALP bosses) to dissolve the ALP at Roosevelt's command" they hope that they either do not understand what happened right before their very eyes, or they don't care to understand. Roosevelt had not the faintest desire to see the ALP dissolved in the present election. Exactly the contrary! The ALP's "independent" nomination for

Governor was absolutely indispensable to the plans of the real Roosevelt party. That is how things were in reality and that's how every intelligent person understood them.

Ever since the last presidential election, a stiff internecine conflict has raged in the Democratic Party between the "progressive" Roosevelt group and the conservatives best represented by James A Farley. Farley sought the presidential nomination. but lost it to Roosevelt, who ran for a third term and was elected. For the past two years Farley has been laying the grounds for a more successful fight against Roosevelt at the Democratic nominating convention in 1944. There Farley intended (and perhaps still intends) to win the nomination either for himself or for one of his men, against the nomination of Roosevelt again or of a Roosevelt man, in case a fourth term is out of the question.

The fight for the Democratic nomination for Governor of New York was a decisive stage in this open struggle for control of the national party and the coming presidential nomination. Farley, as New York Democratic state chairman, put forward the candidacy of John J. Bennett, a docile nonentity. Roosevelt promoted the candidacy of the New Deal stooge, another nonentity named James Mead, senator from New York.

Each side understood that control of the state meant control of the powerful and almost decisive state delegation to the 1944 nominating convention. Roosevelt pressed his candidate with the open hint that if Farley-Bennett won the nomination the Democrats would lose the election because Roosevelt would not be behind him. Farley said, in effect, he can win with Bennett even if Roosevelt doesn't support him.

STOUGE ROLE

What role did the ALP play? Pure and simple stooge of Roosevelt. It shouted: We want Roosevelt's man nominated by the Democrats!

If he isn't nominated, the Democrats can't win New York because we will not support Bennett or any other Farley man! If Bennett is put up, we'll put up a candidate of our own, that is, a genuine Roosevelt man, that is, a candidate of the real Roosevelt party.

Farley & Co. did not listen. They were out to break the control of Roosevelt, to break their past dependency upon the ALP bureaucrats and the votes they could haggle for the Democratic candidates in the past (like Lehman and Roosevelt), and ride into power in New York on a wave of conservative reaction from New Dealism. So, in defiance of Roosevelt and his ALP henchman, Farley licked Mead and put over Bennett at the Roosevelt-baiting Democratic convention in Brooklyn.

Now follow closely the ensuing events. They show a classic example of the cynicism of capitalist politics in general, and of capitalist politics in the labour movement.

What was Roosevelt to do now? What was the loud-mouthed ALP bureaucracy to do? Farley had called their hand. He demanded that they support Bennet with the implication that "even if Bennett wasn't an ideal liberal, he was

Continued on page 10

better to have in office than the Hooveristic crew and mentality represented by Dewey and the Republican mob. Farley was especially convinced that he had Roosevelt hip and thigh, because he knew that Roosevelt's position in the Democratic Party as a whole is such that he dares not pull a Teddy Roosevelt "Bull Moose" break right now, that he dares not "take a walk" out of the party as Al Smith did in 1936.

Among other reasons, he dares not do this for fear of strengthening a precedent for other Democrats doing the same thing in 1944 should Roosevelt get himself nominated again. Farley was right, formally. But Roosevelt outsmarted him in the essence of the matter!

What about the ALP fakers? They sat in their convention back rooms biting their nails. They couldn't nominate Mead, because Mead would no more break with the official Democratic machine and ticket now than Roosevelt would. Yet they had no other purpose than to keep Roosevelt and the real Roosevelt party (i.e., machine) in power, locally and nationally. How to accomplish it? We don't know what political shyster-genius suggested the idea, or whether it came right from the White House or not. But that's not important. The important thing is the way it was done.

The "honorable labor men" kept the ALP convention delegates cooling their heels and after several secret sessions of the very uppermost bureaucracy, they brought forth a dark horse named Dean Alfange, a nobody who makes such nonentities as Bennett and Mead look like titans of history. A Tammany Hall member, he wasn't even a member of the ALP. But that didn't matter to the ALP bosses. They weren't out for an independent ticket; they were out to serve the Roosevelt political interests as they have done for ten years. And — give the devil his due — they made no particular effort to conceal the fact!

Here is how it was to work out:

Roosevelt Strategy

The "Independent" ALP candidate for Governor was to run and keep running in order to make sure Bennett was defeated.

Most of the other state-wide Democratic candidates who were acceptable to Roosevelt and Lehman — like Poletti and O'Leary — would be endorsed (and presumably elected by the ALP). This would show the Democratic Party people in New York that anyone Roosevelt okayed could be elected in New York, but that anyone nominated against his wishes would go down to defeat — thus depriving thousands of deserving Democrats of patronage and all other plants of office.

It would show them that Farley is a jinx to all hungry Democrats and should be run out of control of the New York machine before the all-important nominating convention opens its sessions.

At the same time, by this clever plan, Roosevelt would "remain in the clear." Why? Because formally, he stayed "regular", that is, in spite of the defeat of his own man, he gave three public endorsements to Farley's man, Bennett. Thus he could say: You see, boys, once you turned down my nominee, not even my endorsements could get your nominee (i.e. Farley's nominee) elected. But as everyone with half an eye could see. Roosevelt's "endorsements" of

Bennett were so frigid that it's God's wonder that the poor fellow wasn't stricken with pneumonia.

The Roosevelt strategy was positively double-edged in its cleverness. By defeating Bennett, the New Deal machine would dispose effectively of rival Farley in the 1944 campaign. But at the same time it would elect Dewey to the governorship, strengthen his claim to the Republican Presidential nomination in 1944 and thus confront the Roosevelt candidate with what they consider a push-over, as compared with the more popular "liberal" Republican possibility, Willkie.

Well, the strategy worked like a charm, except for the fact that the Dewey sweep was so strong that it carried the rest of the Republican ticket and defeated, by a very narrow margin, the Democratic state candidates who were also endorsed by the ALP.

What role did the ALP play in the election? It was assigned by the New Deal machine to carry out the task of doing its dirty work, that's all.

"Dewey is the lesser evil" was the frank statement of David Dubinsky of the Ladies Garment Workers Union and one of the real bosses of the ALP, in calling upon the workers to vote for Alfange. "Some may ask: is it to the interest of President Roosevelt to have Dewey elected Governor? Is not Dewey a potential candidate for President in 1944? Well, between the two evils of losing his own party or of having Dewey the candidate for President on the Republican ticket in 1944, it is more important that Roosevelt retain control of his own party." (*New York Times*, 27 October)

The Stalinists, who also ran an "independent" candidate for Governor, also understood this obvious strategy. One of the CP spokesmen, Gilbert Green, put it this way in the text of an election speech over WQXR, in answer to a question of the meaning of a Dewey victory: "As for the President, his prestige will be all the greater, for then it will be abundantly clear that had his choice, Senator Mead, been the Democratic candidate, his election would have been assured.... If the policy we suggest is pursued, Bennett will trail far behind the other Democratic state-wide candidates. Once again it will prove that the President's strength in New York State far exceeds that of Farley and Hoover."

Even pro-Alfange PM understood the scheme. "If Dewey wins he at least will have pulled most of the teeth with which Jim Parley bit out control the Democratic Party in New York." (29 October).

In a word nobody with political understanding was deceived by the "independence" of the political action represented by Alfange's nomination — nobody but the Cannonite politicians.

Alfange's nomination *did not* serve the cause of independent working-class political action — he was nothing less than the stalking horse for the New Deal's determination to keep control of the Democratic Party. To separate Alfange's "independent" nomination from all the real and overwhelming circumstances in which this candidacy originated and grew in sheer abstractionism; it is not revolutionary politics or intelligent thinking of any kind. At best, it is political amateurishness and ignorance of Marxist politics in general and current politics in particular; at worst — and that's what the growing right wing tendency in the SWP leads us to believe — it is the crassest opportunism.

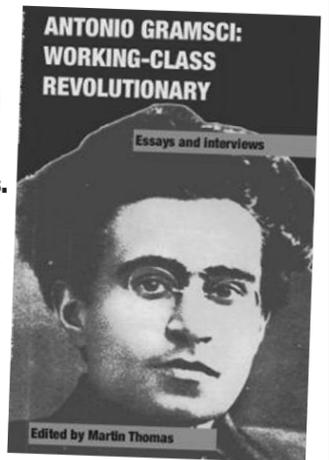
Alfange's nomination and campaign, a vote for Alfange, did not meet the elementary conditions outlined above for working-class support of a political party or ticket. It did not represent independent working-class political action. It was a cynical continuation by the ALP bureaucracy of the capitalist political action they have imposed from the very beginning upon the rank and file who make up the party.

As for the Cannonite endorsement of the Alfange candidacy, it is an opportunist deception of revolutionary militants who make up the supporters of the SWP. It cannot be considered an isolated or episodic error, however.

It is of a piece with the right wing trend which has grown in the SWP since the war began and which became especially pronounced after Leon Trotsky was murdered and the SWP was left to the sole leadership of the theoretical sterility and political opportunism represented by Cannon and his satellites.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI: WORKING-CLASS REVOLUTIONARY

Antonio Gramsci was a leader of the Italian Communist Party in its revolutionary days, and spent all his last years bar a few weeks in Mussolini's fascist jails. *The Prison Notebooks* he wrote in jail have been quarried to justify many varieties of reformist or liberal politics.



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A socialist fighter for national liberation

Our Movement
Micheál MacEoin



Nora Connolly (1893-1981) was an Irish republican socialist and the daughter of the martyred revolutionary leader James Connolly.

Born in Edinburgh in 1893 as the second of seven children, Nora had a turbulent childhood. Her family moved several times. It settled temporarily in Dublin in 1896. Then in 1904 it followed James Connolly to New York state after his emigration to the United States of America the previous year.

Nora grew up at a time when the lack of child labour laws permitted American capitalists to exploit children in steel factories, foundries and textile manufacturers. Nora laboured in a sweatshop producing hats and luxury garments for the rich, while her father involved himself in socialist and syndicalist politics.

Before long, Nora also got involved in political life. She attended union meetings with her father and from 1908 helped him edit and sell *The Harp* newspaper, founded as the organ of the newly-founded Irish Socialist Federation in New York.

In 1910 James Connolly returned to Dublin to become an organiser for the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI). Nora and

the rest of the family followed in early 1911, soon moving to Belfast, where James took up a position in Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU).

In Belfast, Nora threw herself into the political arena. She joined the Gaelic League and the republican women's paramilitary organisation Cumann na mBan, playing a key role along with Countess Markiewicz in the Howth gun-running to provide arms to the Irish Volunteers in 1914.

Later that year she became a recruiter for the Irish Citizens Army (ICA), a workers' militia set up to defend strikers from the police during the Dublin Lock-Out in 1913.

As an activist with the ICA, Nora was involved in the preparations for the Easter Rising in April 1916, liaising with republicans in America such as John Devoy in New York. During the Rising itself, she carried messages between her father and other leaders stationed at garrisons across the city and transmitted dispatches from Padraig Pearse to the Volunteers in Belfast.

After the Rising and the execution of her father, Nora remained active in the republican movement and worked for the ITGWU in Dublin. Along with her brother Roddy, she was among those who formed the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) in October 1921.

Nora was on the side of the party that stressed the need to continue to organise clandestine Communist Groups to influence the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and the trade unions. She thought that open, legal work through the CPI was futile because of the context of guerilla warfare during the Irish War of Inde-

pendence. This position led to the subordination of the communists to the Irish republicans.

After the Irish Civil War broke out in 1922, Nora was a strong supporter of the anti-Treaty side and was imprisoned for her involvement in the struggle.

After the CPI wound itself up in 1924, Nora was involved in an attempt to unsuccessfully wrest Comintern affiliation away from the increasingly erratic Jim Larkin's Irish Worker League (IWL) in 1927. In 1934 she became a member of the Republican Congress — a regroupment of left-wing IRA leaders such as Peadar O'Donnell including the re-founded and wholly Stalinised CPI.

However, Connolly drifted from an identification with Moscow, retaining her connections with the IRA. By 1936 she was in the Irish Labour Party and wrote to Leon Trotsky in Norway, offering to supply him with information on Irish revolutionary movements.

Between 1957 and 1969, Connolly served three terms in the Irish Senate for the bourgeois nationalist party Fianna Fail. Shortly before her death she addressed the 1980 national conference of Sinn Féin.

The life of Nora Connolly embodies the complex inter-relations between the struggles for national and social liberation which have tied the left in Ireland in knots throughout the twentieth century.

Whilst some parts of Connolly's legacy are ambiguous or highly problematic, there can be no doubting her commitment to the causes in which she believed and for which she fought bravely over many decades.

More battles for construction workers

By Darren Bedford

Plumbers and heating and ventilation engineers in the Unite union have overwhelmingly rejected a below-inflation pay offer, with their union threatening to move to an industrial action ballot unless the offer is improved.

The Building and Engineering Services Association (BESA) is offering a two-year deal with a freeze in the first year and a 1.5 percent increase in the second year, despite what Unite calls their “healthy profit margins and order books”. Workers rejected the deal by a margin of nine to one.

BESA employers are the

same contractors behind last year’s attempt to comprehensively deskill the construction industry and unilaterally abolish national bargaining, which led to months of both official and unofficial industrial direct action on construction sites across the country and finally forced employers into an embarrassing climb-down.

In London, electricians mounted flying pickets last week at a Crossrail construction site in Westbourne Park after union reps were victimised and 28 electricians were dismissed. Although Crossrail and senior contracting consortium Bam Ferrovial Kier (BFK) claim the 28 electricians were let go be-

cause the job they were working on was completed, activists accuse the of terminating the contract early in order to get rid of Unite health and safety reps who had raised concerns about conditions on the site. The *Siteworker* bulletin estimates that there may be up to “three to four years” of electrical work left to complete on the site, rubbishing bosses’ claims that there was no more work for the 28 sparks to do. Even the Managing Director of EIS (the electrical contractor whose contract was terminated by BFK) believes anti-union victimisation is behind the early termination of the contract.

The incident shows that,

despite their defeat in the deskilling battle last year, major construction industry employers have not halted their campaign to cut every corner possible in order to squeeze out more profits.

Siteworker said: “Crossrail is going to be one of the largest infrastructure jobs in the whole of Western Europe — if it is unionised, the workforce will earn good wages and the job will be safe. This is a deliberate attempt by BFK to intimidate workers and keep the union off the project, so they can keep wages down and force through rushed production targets.”

Activists also suspect employers of using the no-

torious construction industry blacklist, which contains the names of over 3,000 workers deemed potential troublemakers by construction industry bosses, to victimise trade unionists. The GMB union is continuing its public campaign for justice for blacklisted workers, and received a boost recently when Knowsley Borough Council in Merseyside officially backed the campaign.

However, activists in Knowsley Unison are taking on those same councillors over their plans to become a “commissioning council”, where council services are tendered out to private contractors.

Wildcat strikes hit ferries



By Clarke Benitez

French ferry workers employed by Brittany Ferries, which serves several ports in the UK, launched a prolonged strike against pay cuts and increases in working hours.

The workers, who are members of the CGT and CFDT unions (both based in France), walked out on Friday 21 September after bosses refused to back down on plans to recoup some of the company’s £56 million deficit by increasing working hours by up to 25%.

The strike has already caused considerable financial disruption to the company, forcing them to reimburse passengers whose journeys were disrupted.

Rail workers in pay strike

By Ollie Moore

Members of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport union (RMT) working for rail contractor Amey will strike on Saturday 29 September in an attempt to settle a pay row that has been ongoing since April 2012.

Unions accuse Amey bosses of consistently undermining pay negotiations, first by demanding

separate negotiations with the RMT and white-collar union TSSA (which also organises Amey staff), and then by their senior managers refusing to attend meetings even after they had notionally agreed to joint talks. Amey have now withdrawn the interim pay offer that had been on the table and under discussion.

Amey posted pre-tax profits of £87 million on its last set of accounts.

Civil servants strike to save jobs

By Darren Bedford

Workers in the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) staged a coordinated strike on Friday 21 September.

They picketed local offices in the morning before travelling to London for an afternoon rally. The strike involved 12,000 workers nationally, and is in response to a management plan to cut jobs and

close offices in the departments.

In an interview on the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) website, one worker said: “We are here to protest against the announcements that will see the closure of every single DVLA office in England, Wales and Scotland with the loss of up to 1,200 jobs.

“Everyone is at risk of redundancy and we want to let the DVLA, the DfT and members know the fight is still going on.”

Argos workers strike for pensions

By Pdraig O’Brien

Over 1,000 drivers and warehouse workers employed by retail company Argos struck from Wednesday 19 September until Monday 24 September.

The workers, based at distribution centres in Basildon, Bridgewater, Lutterworth in Leicestershire, Heywood in Lancashire and Castleford, are taking on their bosses in a battle over pensions. Like many other private sector

The move could hit workers’ pensions to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds.

The cuts are taking place despite Argos remaining profitable, and despite chief executive Terry Duddy taking home over £1 million last year and accruing a pension pot of nearly £5 million.

Unite has said that Argos bosses have been “impervious to reason” during negotiations, and warned that further strikes could be on the way.

employers — such as Unilever — Argos are planning to close their employees’ final-salary pensions scheme and replace it with a “defined contribution” scheme, whereby workers contribute to a fund linked to share prices.

Workers of the World



USA: Wal-Mart warehouse workers strike

Warehouse workers working at Wal-Mart distribution centres in Southern California struck on Thursday 13 September, demanding safe working conditions.

The workers, employed by transport firm NFI, face working temperatures of over 50°C, inadequate access to drinking water, and endemic management bullying.

The workers are not members of a union, but are supported by Warehouse Workers United, a workers’ centre backed by local community organisations.

The strike quickly spread to another Wal-Mart warehouse, run by the RoadLink company in Elwood, Illinois. Workers presented a petition to managers demanding living wages and safe working conditions, and were told they were temporarily suspended. They launched a wildcat strike

in response. Philip Bailey, a worker in the Elwood warehouse who earns \$10 an hour, said: “[Bosses] retaliated against us for delivering the petition. People are sick of taking it — the constant speed-ups, never knowing when you’ll go home from work ... My major complaint is we don’t know when we’re going to leave.”

The strikes again highlight the exploitation at every stage of Wal-Mart’s supply chain.

The retail giant has been criticised in the past for union-busting practices on its shop floors, including issuing managers with training and handbooks on how to keep stores union-free.

China: Foxconn riots

A riot involving 2,000 workers broke out at a Foxconn factory in northern China on Monday 24 September after a security guard allegedly struck a worker.

Bosses shut the factory in response, effectively locking out nearly 80,000 workers. Foxconn, which supplies Apple, became notorious after a spate of

suicides by workers depressed by the appalling conditions in the factories. Their Taiyuan plant was also the scene of a mass strike in March 2012.

For more on class struggle in China, see page 8.

Egypt: dock strikers jailed

Five dock workers from Alexandria have been jailed for three years for their role in organising a strike in March 2012.

The strike demanded the removal of board of directors of the Alexandria Container & Cargo Handling Company, who the workers accused of corruption.

They also demanded the renationalisation of the docks, which had been leased to foreign companies (including Chinese state-owned companies).

Legal proceedings were brought against the workers by the chairman of the board, accusing them of disrupting work and wasting funds.

Their sentencing is further evidence of a growing anti-worker, anti-union, and anti-democratic climate in post-Mubarak Egypt.

Workers unite in food factory campaign

By Charles Gradnitzer

British and Polish members of the GMB at the Cranswick Country Foods factory near Hull have been involved in three days of industrial action over a proposed 20-30% pay cut by factory owners.

The workers who have a permanent contract have also been subject to an 8 year pay freeze, while inflation has risen by 42%.

The workers went on strike on 29 of August, and again on 6 and 7 of September, before returning to negotiations with management.

Speaking at Hull & District Trades Council one striking worker said: “The bosses are asking us to work twice as fast while cutting our wages by a third. There are 1,200 workers at the factory; about 80 of us have Cranswick contracts, but the rest are agency workers. The agency workers want to come out with us but are frightened that the agency will sack them. The agencies are paid about a tenner by management and take half of that for themselves for doing nothing, they’re a racket. We want agency workers to have the same contract as us.”

Dave Ogelsby, regional GMB officer, added that management had been startled by the show of solidarity from other trade unions who attended the picket of the factory.

Future plans include demonstrations outside of the supermarkets that are supplied by Cranswick, as well as continuing to join the strikers on future picket lines. At the end of the meeting Hull & District Trades collected £400 to help the striking workers continue their dispute.

This strike represents an important step forward in solidarity between British and Eastern European labour.

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

Low pay: stop the race to the bottom

By Ira Berkovic

Dozens of academics from Britain's top universities — mainly professors of economics and business studies — have penned an open letter to the *Times* which calls for an end to national collective pay bargaining in the public sector.

The letter proposes a scheme whereby individual public sector bodies could negotiate local pay rates, thereby allowing pay to more closely reflect the cost of living in a particular area.

The letter states: "National pay rates in the public sector means that public sector wages are out of line with local conditions in many parts of the country. In some areas, the public sector struggles to recruit staff because wages are too low. This worsens public services such as education and health in those areas."

This is all perfectly reasonable, surely? If the cost of living is higher, then wages should be higher to reflect this. Trade union campaigns in London have fought for a "London Living Wage" of £8.30 an hour — surely a form of local bargaining and local pay. So what's the problem?

The problem is that the academics' proposal is not intended to secure wage increases for workers, but rather to allow bosses to further cut pay. The scheme also involves a proposal to keep each re-

gion's wage bill constant, meaning that any increases would be necessarily limited and creating an inbuilt compulsion towards "savings" — i.e., cuts. The proposal is designed to weaken workers' strength by preventing us from bargaining on a national level, and freeing public sector bosses from the obligation to negotiate with our national unions.

CONTEXT

Context is important, too. The letter is not written against the backdrop of benevolent public sector bosses clamouring to increase their employees' wages.

The low pay epidemic in the public sector is now so acute that even senior figures in the Local Government Association are starting to baulk. Stephen Knight, a Liberal Democrat who sits on the LGA's workforce board, believes that if the public sector pay freeze continues, some council workers could see their statutory pay fall below minimum-wage levels. He said: "Unless we have pay rises in the next

year there will be a number of people falling below the statutory minimum wage, we are that close. We do need to have a pay rise next year."

George Osborne's proposals for greater regionalisation in determining public sector pay and conditions, and the already existing reality of de facto regional pay for some public sector workers (such as health workers in the south west, where Trusts and hospitals have formed a "pay cartel" to impose negotiations outside of the national framework) are also key contexts here. So, too, is the report by the Institute for Employment Research and Institute for Fiscal Studies which shows that low-income families could see their incomes plummet a further 15% by 2020, even if the economic downturn slows. With 2013/2014 public sector pay negotiations due to begin next month, the academics' letter is clearly intended to create an atmosphere in which unions will feel pressured into accepting a shoddy deal for fear of losing the

right to bargain nationally altogether.

At the extreme fringe of the pay cutters' party within the ruling class are the likes of Kwasi Kwarteng and Dominic Raab, Tory MPs behind new book *Britannia Unchained*, who accuse British workers of being "the worst idlers in the world", and believe that we must "compete" with workers in the global south by showing our willingness to work for extremely long hours and low wages. They might, as yet, be a minority voice, but they too are a shrill part of the growing ruling-class clamour to which the "respectable" voices of the academics behind the open letter have now been added.

The labour movement should respond with a counter-offensive around clear, simple demands. Firstly, the basic principle of a living wage — a wage which allows everyone, wherever they live, to not merely scrape by but to live a full and enjoyable life.

Secondly, the demand for "savings" to be found by cutting top managers' pay and bureaucratic waste (for example, the huge amounts of money squandered on "management consultancy" in every branch of the public sector) rather than through cutting employees' wages.

London protest backs QCH strikers

By Martin Thomas

On Monday 24 September, workers and students protested at Lend Lease's London office in solidarity with the workers in dispute at the Queensland Children's Hospital construction site in Brisbane.

The workers have been out since 6 August. The dispute has been ruled unlawful; strikes on the site have been banned for the duration of the project; union officials have been banned from going near the site; community protest organiser Bob Carnegie, whom the workers asked in when the union officials were banned, and eight of the workers, have also been banned, but are defying the ban.

Yet the workers continue, fighting for a principle: a union agreement on the site, under which employees of all the many subcontractors on the site will be paid the rate of the job. The main contractor, Abigroup, is stubborn, but is losing \$300,000 a day, and is negotiating.

Lend Lease is Abigroup's parent company. Its London office is heavily provided with security, but the security workers

were okay with us. Maybe they're employed by subcontractors too.

They wouldn't let us into the building to deliver our letter to Lend Lease bosses calling on them to respect the QCH workers' demands. Eventually someone — another subcontractor, we guess — was sent out to receive the letter on behalf of Lend Lease.

The office is at Regent's Place, near Regent's Park, in luxurious buildings redeveloped for the landlord, British Land, by Lend Lease itself. The contract for the redevelopment was worth £150 million to Lend Lease. British Land's annual rental income from Regent's Place — where Lend Lease is one of the seven main tenants — is £51 million.

No expense spared for the bosses' offices! Lend Lease and Abigroup have a different attitude for more socially valuable projects like the Queensland Children's Hospital. There, they grab every cent.

● More on the QCH strike: workersliberty.org/qch

Greece: another general strike, but Golden Dawn surges

By Chris Reynolds

Greek workers are on general strike on 26 September, in protest against the new round of cuts planned by the coalition government.

A number of strikes are ongoing. Nikos Fotopoulos, leader of the power workers' union GENOP-DEH, has called for a rolling programme of repeated 24 hour strikes, with occupations of public buildings and permanent protest gatherings in public squares.

Working-class mobilisa-

tion is urgently needed not only to defeat the government's measures, but also to stop the rise of the Golden Dawn fascists. Golden Dawn has risen since 17 June to between 9% and 12% in the polls; it is now ahead of Pasok, which got 44% in 2009.

DEA, one of the revolutionary socialist groups within Syriza, says: "Our response should be constructed on the widest front for anti-fascist action. The left parties and trade unions are unquestionably the backbone of this anti-fascist alliance. And at this

point the responsibility on Syriza for massive initiatives is most crucial..."

Golden Dawn has set up Greek-only job centres, in central Greece for the factories in the area, in Pieria for the kiwi-fruit harvest, in Magnesia for various harvests.

Golden Dawn calls on employers "to take up their responsibilities towards the local communities and the national economy, preferring Greek

workers" and on Greek workers to "treat any job offer with responsibility", i.e. to accept any terms and conditions and not to unionise.

Golden Dawn does not place any requirements of compliance with labour legislation for the Greek workers that are hired, let alone any obligation for redundancy pay for the immigrant workers that would be unlawfully sacked.

Local trade unions should respond immediately by inspecting workplaces where labour law

and workers' rights have been violated, by supporting redundant workers regardless of their nationality, and by recruiting migrant workers into unions.

One union in Euboea and Boeotia has responded: "We are making clear to Golden Dawn that every single worker in our industry has no problem with our immigrant co-workers and class brothers. We have problems with our bosses, independent of their nationality, who have refused to pay us for one, two, three, four, five or

even six months. The bosses who daily violate labor rights, apply 4 days work with reduced pay..."

Golden Dawn is also organising blood donations "for Greeks only". One clinic in Thessaloniki has accepted these, saying that the donor signs a statement that the blood will be available to any patient in need and so Golden Dawn's "for Greeks only" condition will not be met.

All hospital workers, with their unions, should fight today for free health care for all people and against racial discrimination.