

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



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For a workers' government

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STOP



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EVICTIONS!

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!

Contact us:

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Who are FEMEN?

By Elizabeth Butterworth

When Tunisian feminist Amina Tyler posted topless pictures of herself online with "Fuck Your Morals" and "My body belongs to me and is not a source of anyone's honour" written across her chest, she received death threats and was put in a psychiatric hospital. "Topless Jihad Day" was the Ukrainian feminist group FEMEN's response.

In various cities, topless activists' slogans were "Free Amina", "Fuck Your Morals", "Bare Breasts Against Islamism" and "Viva Topless Jihad". A few FEMEN supporters also wore fake beards to dress as stereotypes of Arab men.

Some Muslim women reacted against this, saying FEMEN are Islamophobes and imperialists, posting pictures online with slogans such as "Nudity does not liberate me and I do not need saving", "Do I look like I need imperialists to free me from oppression!" and "Islam Gave Me Freedom".

FEMEN's response was an incoherent article by their leader Inna Shevchenko accusing Muslim women who are against FEMEN of not standing up for themselves and saying she would like to see a world free of various "troubles".

The leaders of FEMEN

"Incompetent" still running the show

"This bank failed because the management got it completely wrong", according to a Tory-chaired parliamentary committee investigating the collapse of HBOS, which collapsed and was taken over by Lloyds, which in turn had to be rescued by semi-nationalisation.

The top boss was "delusional". Hundreds of billions of public money were pumped into saving the banks.

Now the Tories are trying to make the working class pay the price, while the "incompetent" still run the banks and get huge pay-outs.

Showing solidarity only when it suits

are not good. They do not properly differentiate between Islam and Islamism. They protest against not only the Muslim Brotherhood but also outside regular mosques.

Their politics are incoherent and do not account for cultural, societal and individual interpretations of Islam. Their ignorance and lack of interest in the global women's movement has led to this outpouring of anger from Muslim women. They show solidarity only when it suits their message.

They demand people to get totally on-board with them, for example saying "Muslim women: Let's get naked!" rather than looking into different women's movements and supporting and working with existing secularist and women's groups or even trying to convince people about their message.

A bit like internet hackers "Anonymous", to some extent it is a loose network. Women might support them without realising their full range of aims and beliefs. Their leaders are quite vague. Yet it does have offices, leaders and stated beliefs. What are those beliefs?

FEMEN attack sex workers. They support the Ukrainian state's prohibition of sex work, and advocate the criminalisation of prostitution in other countries. They say they are waging a "war on the sex industry".

In a protest in Paris at a porn industry event, they physically attacked two performers, and invaded the stage with "Go Rape Yourself" written across their bodies. They protested against Euro 2012 on the

grounds that it brought sex tourism with it, in contrast to the self-organised sex workers at the 2012 Olympics which called for no arrests and no deportations.

They are not interested in solidarity with sex workers or sex workers' rights. They say that sex workers "satisfy the lusty beast of patriarchy" and compare prostitution to fascism. Polish sex workers have protested against FEMEN, saying "FEMEN! Get the fuck out of our business!"

BIZARRE

Their version of feminism is also bizarrely nationalistic. One of their core aims on their website is promoting the Ukraine as "the country with great opportunities for women".

Despite their usual anti-church stance they lobby for independence for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

They have a strange attitude to womanhood as well. They have said "we build up a national image of femininity, maternity and beauty based on the Euro-Atlantic women's movements' experience".

They train their activists at a camp in Paris, promoting "hot boobs, a cool head and clean hands".

There are positive aspects to FEMEN. They are generally secularists. They are pro-choice. They are anti-dictatorships, and have accosted Putin shouting "Go to hell Dictator". They have protested against the Pope for the Catholic Church's stance on contraception and abortion. They worked with Egyptian feminists to op-

pose Morsi. They objected to Ikea's erasing of women from its catalogues in Saudi Arabia, with one Muslim activist holding a sign saying "Allah created me visible". And, of course, Amina Tyler's actions were courageous and inspiring.

But it appears that to be FEMEN one just has to be topless and daubed with slogans. That's limiting.

White women dressing up as caricatures of Arab men is much worse. It is absolutely racist and demonstrates an attitude to non-white women that is at best patronising.

Our problem with FEMEN is not that they are "skinny white feminists" who get their tits out, but that they talk a load of garbage, attack sex workers, patronise other women and have no real analysis of feminism outside of Europe. They say, "We have worked out our own unique form of self-expression based upon courage, creativity, efficiency and shock". Right.

Public nudity is a fair tactic. But what little substance there is behind the slogans and bare breasts is troubling.

"C2" women

against the Tories

"C2" (skilled manual worker) women have swung away from the Tories more than any other social group. Pro-Tory sentiment among them has declined by 12% since the 2010 election, according to an Ipsos Mori poll.

Stop “bedroom tax” evictions!

By David Kirk

Across the country demonstrations and meetings have been held against the “Bedroom Tax”. The organisers vary from area to area — a patchwork of community groups, union branches, Labour Party people, and left groups.

The chief demands are for councils and housing associations to re-classify homes (so that they are counted as having “studies” or “storerooms” instead of “excess” bedrooms) and to pledge not to evict tenants who can’t or won’t pay.

Dundee and Brighton

and Hove councils have said they will refuse to evict people who fall into arrears on rent payments due to the “Bedroom Tax”. Nottingham’s right-wing Labour council has said it will re-classify rooms in all its council houses so no tenant gets hit by the tax.

Knowsley Housing Trust is one of several Housing Associations that have re-classified rooms too.

These examples show mass pressure can force even right-wing Labour councils to stand by their tenants. In putting pressure on Labour councils, trade unions and local Labour party branches are a vital arena of struggle.

1 April was the start date for the “Bedroom Tax”. It is a cut in housing benefit for social housing tenants of working age who are deemed to have one or more spare bedroom.

If you are classed as having one spare bedroom you will have to find 14% of the rent; if two or more, 25%. Around 660,000 housing benefit claimants’ will be hit by the bedroom tax.

The Government argues that the tax will encouraged people to move to smaller homes. But welfare minister Lord Freud, who has 12 bedrooms in his country house and his London flat, will be spared such “encouragement”; so

will other rich people.

For worse-off people, there is a pitiful supply of council and housing association properties available at any size because little council housing has been built since the 1970s and the stock has been eroded by “Right To Buy”.

The Government wants to cut the housing benefit bill. Yet if social-housing tenants are pushed out by the tax into the private rental sector, then rents there are higher, sometimes more than double, and housing benefit may be higher. The “Bedroom Tax” doesn’t apply to tenants of private landlords.

The real effect of the

Leeds protest

“Bedroom Tax” is to attack social housing and push tenants into the private sector.

The Labour Party leaders have attacked the Tories over the “Bedroom Tax” sometimes quite effectively, and the government has made some concessions. However, the Labour leaders have not committed to repeal the “Bedroom Tax” when in power.

We should argue for the

groups and unions campaigning against the “Bedroom Tax” also to build a proper national campaign that forces Labour to commit to repealing the tax as soon as it is power.

Campaigns should also support non-payment by tenants and communities organising against eviction.

The “Bedroom Tax” can be beaten.

• handsoffourhomes.org.uk

Better to break the whip than vote for cuts

Gary Wareing is one of the “Hull Three”, three Labour councillors who voted against a cuts budget on the city’s Labour-controlled council. Along with Dean Kirk and Gill Kennett, Gary has been suspended from the Labour group. He is involved in the Labour Representation Committee and the Councillors Against Cuts campaign. He spoke to Sam Greenwood from *Solidarity*.

We are against austerity as a means of solving the current problems that the council and the country has got.

We weren’t happy about being bailiffs for the Tory government and making their cuts for them. That is

not what we were elected to do.

When we voted against the cuts, the Labour Party locally responded really well. My ward Labour Party has passed a motion supporting us, and party members have told that they fully support our stand.

The Labour whip on the council asked me if I knew how serious it was to break the whip. But I don’t believe breaking the whip is a more serious crime than making 600 people redundant, and closing libraries and other services.

I have had fantastic support from Unite and Unison locally. At a local meeting, Unite called on councillors not to vote for cuts. My own

union, [train drivers’ union] ASLEF, has been very supportive of the position we have taken. Council officers and staff may not feel able to say openly that they support us, but they have told me privately they are glad that somebody has taken a stand against the cuts.

After we broke the whip the Labour group on the council met and decided to suspend all three councillors. One of us got a three-month suspension and two others got an indefinite suspension, though all three of us carried out the same vote. We have been banned from associating with other Labour councillors.

MEETINGS

We now can’t attend Labour group meetings and make our argument, so there’s a lower level of debate within the group.

Even though we have no input into deciding Labour policy on the council, we’re still expected to vote in line with group decisions.

The Hull Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and the Councillors Against Cuts campaign nationally were very important forums to discuss our ideas and plan our actions. The LRC has provided a space for political discussion and campaign planning that isn’t always available in official Labour Party meetings.

It’s the responsibility of the whole labour movement to fight the cuts. The trade unions have to build a campaign in the lead up to next

need to provide decent services in their area, and campaign to demand the allocation of that amount of money. If they did not get that money, they should then say they are not prepared to set a budget.

That would bring them into conflict with the government and would provide an opportunity to mobilise local people and the local labour movement behind the council. Council staff should refuse to implement any cuts on behalf of the government.

CRISIS

We are in the worst crisis for 200 years, the longest recession since 1930, and this is only the beginning.

I think there is still a feeling among people that if they keep their heads down we will come out of this and go back to the good times of the 1990s and early 2000s. That is the past. The future holds further deeper cuts, higher unemployment, and bigger shocks to the system. We should be explaining that, and the alternatives.

The Labour Party is not a capitalist party, it is a socialist party. It should be putting forward socialist policies in opposition to austerity and capitalism. We should be explaining that there is no solution to the current crisis under capitalism, and capitalism is causing the problems. Our solutions should be a socialist programme of nationalising the banks, rail, utilities, and the leading

conglomerates in the country and running them for the benefit of the people rather than the 1%.

What we have done is start to prick councillors’ consciences, and say “is this right?” We’re making them ask the question of themselves.

As far as I’m concerned, I remain a Labour councillor and of course a socialist. We have to try and win the argument at every level of the labour movement. We have to show the Labour group that party members and the working class in general don’t accept it is Labour’s job to implement cuts.

Labour Parties locally have in many cases been hollowed out, so they’re often mainly made up of councillors and their friends rather than being organs of local working-class communities and organisations. But from the perspective of the average working person, Labour remains the party of the working class.

If people went into local Labour parties and transformed meetings into mass forums where big decisions are taken and representatives are elected by a much larger and diverse cross section, and if even a tenth of trade unionists joined and were active in the party, they could transform it.

• Support the Hull 3 campaign — facebook.com/supportthehull3

A protest full of Unite trade union flags gathered outside Warrington Town Hall on 4 April as Labour councillor Kevin Bennett faced a disciplinary hearing over his vote against cuts.

Bennett was suspended by the Warrington Labour group. Unite activists now need to push the union to step up protest in support of Bennett and of the Hull Labour councillors penalised for opposing cuts.

A motion (No. 42) supporting anti-cuts councillors is on the agenda for the June conference of the public service union Unison. Supportive amendments, and decisions to prioritise the motion for conference debate, are needed from other Unison branches.

• councillorsagaincuts.org

“Live life to the fullest, make a better world”

Mike Kyriazopoulos, a Workers' Liberty supporter based in New Zealand/Aotearoa and active in Fightback, wrote this letter to comrades.

Early this year I was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. It appears as though the “progress” of the disease (oddly Stalinist terminology) is quite rapid. So I wanted to thank all of you who know me for your political guidance, solidarity, friendship and love over the years.

I first came across the AWL at York University Labour Club. But I realised the group was serious when I joined an occupation because Janine Booth was stood on the balcony of the Central

Mike on a protest against anti-union laws outside the Royal Courts of Justice, London (mid 1990s). The wig was borrowed!

Hall with a megaphone, urging students to join the protest against grant cuts.

When I graduated, I got a job on the Post, in line with the group's policy on “colonisation”, or “inside organising”. Those days were among the most vivid memories of my political life, so forgive me if I reminisce a little. The seven years I spent in the industry taught me heaps of lessons in the sometimes bitter realities of the class struggle. I was thrust in the deep end, finding myself a rep within a few months, be-

cause the previous guy had been sacked, and no one else wanted to do the job.

Pretty soon I attracted the attention of management. First they tried to get me to become a governor, then they tried to sack me — twice. Both disciplinaries were related to organising wildcat action. The first time, they stuffed up the process, and I got off scot-free. The next time I copped a final warning and two day's suspension.

During a week-long wildcat strike involving many London offices, I remember being on a picket line of one. One does not make a virtue or a habit of such a thing, but sometimes it is a necessity. Most of our office scabbed because they were scared of the strike being sold out (which it eventually was). Only a handful of us struck, and one morning I was the only one who turned up for the picket line duty. Some of the strikebreakers implored me to come back to work, because they were convinced I would be sacked, in which case, they assured me, they would go on strike to get me reinstated! I was not sacked.

FORTUNATE

I was fortunate to be in a left-wing union branch. I joined the branch executive as political officer, where I worked with other socialists to secure the branch's support for Ken Livingstone and the Socialist Alliance in the London elections of 2000.

The decision was robustly debated at a meeting of rank and file reps. The branch secretary voiced a prophetic word of caution about not knowing how long this alliance would last. Our branch paid a heavy price, having all its funds frozen by an unelected bureaucrat in head office, but they didn't back down. To me, it highlighted how the Socialist Alliance had begun to build something in the labour movement, only to have that opportunity criminally squandered by the key players within the Alliance.

The greatest success we had at Finsbury Park Delivery Office was winning extra jobs, night duties, following an unofficial overtime ban. Management always intended to claw the

duties back eventually, but we managed to hold off the revisions for a good few years.

In retrospect, I was hampered by being isolated in a sub delivery office. I never made much progress towards establishing a rank and file movement. But then, such a movement usually requires a great upsurge in militancy to establish it, so there's an element of Catch-22.

In 2007, I emigrated to New Zealand, essentially for personal reasons. Comrades, I'm sorry if it felt like I turned my back on you. I never turned my back on the struggle.

I joined the Workers' Party (now Fightback) because that was the most open and democratic group going. Unfortunately, it was controlled by a clique whose political background was soft Maoist and kitsch Trotskyist. They encouraged a culture of avoiding tricky historical questions. I was remiss in going with the flow, taking the line of least resistance for a while.

Perhaps subconsciously I thought that the insights of Third Camp socialism on the corrosive effects of Stalinism were not so relevant in the 21st century. It was only when the leadership clique abruptly walked out of the party, and retired to the blogosphere, that I did some rethinking.

After some discussions with Martin Thomas I published a number of internal bulletins on Stalinism, the fighting propaganda group, Maori liberation, Third Camp socialism and Maoism. I hope that I have had a positive effect on the trajectory of the group, which now explicitly defines itself as anti-Stalinist.

I do believe the AWL has something precious in its fragmented Third Camp tradition. Not in the sense of a socialist “holy Grail”, or a “historico-philosophical master key”, but as a method of training revolutionaries to think critically.

I don't need to tell any of you what's wrong with Michel Pablo. He did, however, have the best motto: “The meaning of life is life itself, to live as fully as you can.”

Comrades, most of you will be blessed with decades of life ahead of you. Live them to the fullest making a better world. Aroha nui (all my love).

Labour must make a positive case for welfare



Dave Osler

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled, as the Kevin Spacey character argues in *The Usual Suspects*, is convincing the world that he doesn't exist.

Given our government's success in persuading the electorate, millions of claimants included, that it doesn't need the welfare state, I'm starting to suspect that Old Nick numbers among Lynton Crosby's sources of inspiration.

The sheer crudity of the *Daily Mail's* now infamous “Vile product of welfare UK” front page, directly linking Mick Philpott's murder of six kids to his receipt of benefits, probably came across as just that little bit too strident for the ostensibly detoxified mainstream of what claims to be no longer a nasty party.

But that didn't stop George Osborne serving up a watered down version of this muck for the benefit of an audience of low-paid supermarket distribution workers the very same day, piggybacking on the inevitable furore to boost to his own media exposure. Only the cynical will suspect co-ordination here, and in this case, you can include me within the ranks of the cynical.

What also seems clear is that these notions are gaining traction. Look at some of the statistics contained in an otherwise lamentable piece by one-time Revolutionary Communist Party stalwart Brendan O'Neill. Which newspaper did it appear in, I hear you ask? Guess.

Ignore the gloating, almost hysterical, tone of the piece and the uncritical wholesale acceptance of questionable dependency culture sociology, imported directly from the US right. Set to one side the clichéd invocations of “middle class liberals”, who are depicted to a woman and man as “plummy-voiced radicals” and “left-leaning do-gooders in Britain's

Labour politicians like Liam Byrne have joined in the demonisation of benefit claimants

leafier suburbs”.

Indeed, all you posh boys and girls should immediately put down the macchiato coffee O'Neill accuses you of drinking, and ponder instead the British Social Attitudes Survey findings he quotes.

According to this non-partisan source, in 2003 a surprisingly high 40% of benefits recipients agreed that “unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work”. By 2011, that figure had risen to 59%, a clear majority. Understanding this point has to be the baseline for a sober leftist assessment.

Simply pointing to the *Spirit of '45*, by way of protective incantation against evil in an era when support for the postwar social democratic consensus is crumbling after three decades

of ideological assault, is as insufficient as it is commendable.

What we need to grasp is that the welfare changes introduced last week, reprehensible as socialists find them, are evidently popular among voters.

Had Blairism still been the dominant force within the Labour Party, its instinctive reaction would have been to enter into a Dutch auction with the right, as it devised ever more ingenious methods of paring down benefit entitlements ever further. The likes of Caroline Flint or James Purnell would no doubt have drooled at taking on the task.

As it is, opposition work and pensions spokesman Liam Byrne has come up with a timid attempt at triangulation, rewriting a famous Marxist slogan as “from each according to his contribution, to each according to his contribution”.

This might seem savvy now, given the feedback from the focus groups. But the half-heartedness is all too apparent, and leaves the political initiative entirely in Tory hands.

The alternative — mounting a positive defence of universal welfare provision, on ethical and pragmatic grounds alike — requires a degree of moral courage that Labour has long found it difficult to muster.

After all, there are many more *Daily Mail* front pages to come between now and the next election, and not a few will be revisiting the territory covered in the last few days.

But it will not be impossible, especially as the impact of austerity will not spare that tabloid's readership from its ravages. The success of the petition to make IDS live up to his “I could live on £53 a week” and the grass roots campaign against the bedroom tax demonstrates that the right is not immune to challenge on this terrain.

Unfortunately, Byrne's tactic of splitting the difference with Dacre, envisaging as it does the reduction of the welfare state to little more than a glorified insurance scheme, concedes defeat from the outside.

He should remember that if this ground is lost, it may not be regained for decades.

Thatcher: now her politics must die

Above: the funeral of Joe Green, a miner killed by a scabberding lorry while picketing Ferrybridge power station in Yorkshire in the 1984-5 strike. Thatcher should have died then, not the miners! On learning of Thatcher's death on 8 April 2013, Dave Hopper, veteran of the strike and secretary of the Durham Miners' Association, said: "It's a great day for all the miners; I imagine we will have a counter demonstration when they have her funeral. Our children have got no jobs and the community is full of problems. There's no work and no money and it's very sad the legacy she has left behind."

If we believed in a hell, we would have no doubt Margaret Thatcher would now be in it. Now we must send to hell, too, the politics which she represented.

Labour leader Ed Miliband declared that: "We greatly respect her political achievements and her personal strength".

With a low-key comment that he "disagreed" a bit with Thatcher, he said that she had "moved the centre ground of British politics". That, from a Labour leadership always keen to claim that it is occupying that same "centre ground".

In 2002 the Labour government — Labour, not Tory — repealed old rules banning monuments for living politicians from the House of Commons in order to erect a statue of Thatcher. The act symbolised Blair's and Brown's acceptance of a Tory-crafted "centre ground".

The shift in popular attitudes attributed to Thatcher — towards mean-spirited individualism, and hostility to and fear

of the worse-off — actually came much more under Blair and Brown, after they disappointed and crushed the hopes which many still had in 1997 for a return to a more generous society.

Thatcher's death after years of incapacitating old age brings no relief to the working class. There would have been better cause for celebration if she had died 29 years ago, strung up by miners victorious in their 1984 strike. Or, better, 33 years ago, if the steel workers' strike of 1980, the first big workers' struggle against her government, had been conducted militantly and driven her from power.

Before Thatcher's years in office, 1979 to 1990, Britain was an unequal and exploitative capitalist society, but much less unequal than now. The Gini measure of inequality rose from 26% in 1979 to 37% in 1990. Inequality had decreased a lot between the 1930s and the late 1940s, but now a steady upward trend seems normal.

Before Thatcher, beggars and homeless people were rare on the streets of London. After a few years of her government, they were common.

Before Thatcher, most people thought the welfare state was as established a fixture as the abolition of slavery or serfdom. She started the axing-back which the current government continues.

Trade union rights were also considered a fixture. The Labour government of 1964-70 and the Tory government of 1970-4 had tried what, compared to Thatcher's measures, were marginal adjustments. By 1997-2010 we had a Labour government which regarded the Tories' huge curbs on workers' basic rights to withdraw our labour and show solidarity as a law of nature, not to be disturbed.

Over decades up to the 1970s, mineworkers, dockers, car workers, and other groups once industrial helots had gradually acquired some civilised conditions. Thatcher's government smashed their unions, their industries, and their communities.

ENGINEERED

Alan Budd, chief economic adviser to the Tory government in 1991-7, commented later: "What was engineered there, in Marxist terms, was a crisis of capitalism which recreated a reserve army of labour and has allowed the capitalist to make high profits ever since".

The "reserve army of labour" meant whole generations of young working-class people condemned to lives of unemployment or patchy, insecure, dead-end jobs.

The pre-Thatcher "settlement" had been built up over long decades, from the legalisation of trade unions in 1825 onwards. Some of the way people thought is conveyed by the jibe (by Michael Foot, I think) that a Conservative was someone who accepted every reform except the next one. Today "reform" means the opposite of what it meant before Thatcher — a measure to increase inequality, to cut back social provision, to make society meaner and more vicious.

Thatcher was not, however, a brave if misguided militant who courageously defied the odds. She was ruthless — but from the comfortable position of being well surrounded and supported by the rich and mighty.

From 1945 to around 1970, the rich and mighty felt that welfare and trade-union rights were an inevitable and acceptable price for the smooth advance of capitalism. That changed after the breakdown in 1971 of the international economic architecture created in 1944-5, the sharpening of global capitalist competition, and the start of an era of sharper capitalist ups and downs.

By the time Thatcher became Tory leader in 1975, she was well integrated into a solid body of ruling-class opinion determined to cancel the concessions which had been made to the working class after 1945 for fear of revolutionary upheavals such as followed World War One.

The Tories formulated a first scheme at Selsdon in 1970. Tory prime minister Edward Heath soon decided the scheme was unworkable. Nicholas Ridley, who later formulated the Tories' plans for the 1984-5 miners' strike, formed a "Selsdon group" to oppose the retreat.

Help us raise £15,000

It's been a good week for the AWL fund appeal, but we've had to step up to respond to a crisis. The risograph in our office finally gave up the ghost after a decade of dedicated service.

A risograph is an industrial duplicating machine — basically a heavy-duty photocopier — which allows us to copy the thousands of leaflets, posters, and campus and workplace bulletins that we use in our organisation's day-to-day activity.

For the purposes of persuading people to take active ownership of revolutionary ideas, social networking and the internet in general can't replace face-to-face contact, and if you want to talk to someone at work or college about ideas it's much more direct to give them something to read than to tell them to look something up online at a later date. Printed literature is vital for any political organisation.

The AWL is not a slick NGO or some other corporate-style third-sector body. We're an activist collective with only one full-time organiser run by working-class people who are all feeling the squeeze of the worst recession since 1929. But the organisation exists because our members believe in its ideas, and that means we know how important it is that we're able to communicate them as effectively our resources allow. Comrades have responded admirably to cover the costs of a new machine. Can you help us too?

Help us raise £15,000 by May Day 2013. You can contribute in the following ways:

- Taking out a monthly standing order using the form below or at www.workersliberty.org/resources. Please post completed forms to us at the AWL address below.

- Making a donation by cheque, payable to "AWL", or donating online at www.workersliberty.org/donate.

- Organising a fundraising event.

- Taking copies of *Solidarity* to sell.

- Get in touch to discuss joining the AWL. More information: 07796 690874 / awl@workersliberty.org / AWL, 20E Tower Workshops, 58 Riley Road, London SE1 3DG.

Total raised so far: £9,416



We raised £950 this week in donations and increased standing orders.

Thanks to Dave, Gemma, John, Jon, Jean, Heather, Mark, Paul and Stan.

Promised donations and IOUs due to pay in over the next week should yield another £1,000 or more.

Its manifesto of September 1973 demanded "drastic cuts in public spending", "dismantling the nationalised industries", repeal of tenants' rights and reduction of council housing to "only those in true need", "help to people in most need without the high costs and lost liberties of the Welfare State", and "a free market in education facilities".

Thatcher's Tories came to office on a headline promise of curbing price inflation (high in the 1970s), but with the Selsdon subtext. They were emboldened by the ignominy of the previous Labour government, which, facing economic crisis, had adopted an early version of "monetarism", declared "the party was over" for social provision, and made sharper cuts to the National Health Service than Thatcher herself would.

The Tories got bolder as the labour movement stumbled and retreated. They pushed through nine major rounds of anti-union laws.

The claim that Thatcher's measures ended economic sclerosis is nonsense. Between 1995 and 1973, economic output per person increased by an average of 2.8% a year. Between mid-1979 and mid-2012 it has increased by an average of 1.8% a year. The rich have done relatively well, but the worse-off much worse than before 1979.

In the crises of the 1970s and 80s another way out was possible from the collapse of the class compromise of mid-century. The working class, which in 1979 reached its highest-ever level of trade-union organisation, could have taken the initiative for socialism. We failed to do so because the labour movement lacked leadership and political awareness, and for no other reason.

In the new and more drastic capitalist crisis we can get another chance. Not easy and quick, but a chance. Let's

We don't need sexist language to condemn Thatcher

There are plenty of words with which to curse Thatcher; we shouldn't use terms with sexist overtones.

In the early 1980s Women's Fightback and the forerunners of AWL argued against the common anti-Thatcher slogan "Ditch the Bitch!", and over time it became less current.

Using "The Witch is Dead" to celebrate Thatcher's death is no better.

The Marxists on oppression

The fourth part of a review article looking at the themes of John Riddell's new book of documents* from the early communist movement. The week Paul Hampton looks at how they debated women's liberation and other issues of oppression.

The early Communist International's focus was on working class self-liberation and this was reflected in the time spent on discussions on party building, work to transform the labour movement and on the specifics of class struggle strategy.

But the Bolsheviks had made their reputation as tribunes of the people, taking up any and every matter of injustice and oppression against the tsar. While seeking to win hegemony in the working class, they also sought to gain hegemony for the working class among the exploited and oppressed as a whole. The Comintern debated matters of women's liberation, anti-racism, peasant struggles and anti-imperialism.

The early Comintern took time to discuss women's emancipation.

At the Second Congress in 1920, the German revolutionary Clara Zetkin produced the *Theses for the Communist Women's Movement*, which took a clear stand for women's "full social liberation and full equal rights," but warned of a "gulf be-

**Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International* (Haymarket, 2012)

tween theory and practice". The Comintern established a women's secretariat, which published a monthly magazine, *The Communist Women's International*, and worked with women's committees organised within individual parties. The Comintern was highly critical of "bourgeois feminists" and sought to win women to the working-class movement.

The resolution at the Third Congress in 1921 stated that "there is no special women's question, nor should there be a special women's movement". Communism would be won "not by the united efforts of women of different classes, but by the united struggle of all the exploited".

The Fourth Congress discussion on women was brief and did not raise any significant new theoretical questions. However the speeches explained how the women section's work was to be developed and integrated with other party work. Zetkin spoke of the need for autonomous organisation, reflecting that "however much Communist work among women must be firmly linked ideologically and organically to the life of each party, we nonetheless need special bodies to carry out this work". She argued that "every man is welcome to take part in the special Communist work carried out among women. That applies to our committees as well as to our entire activity in its various expressions and arenas".

Zetkin approved of the work of women comrades in Italy, who she lauded for having founded groups for "sympathising women". And she argued that it was vital that Commu-

Graphic produced by the African Blood Brotherhood, an early twentieth century socialist/black nationalist organisation based mainly in New York. Such political developments formed the background to discussions of the 1920s.

"The pamphlet changed my life"

AWL



By new member Elizabeth Butterworth

I have never been in a revolutionary socialist party before and I don't think I was serious about socialism until very recently. I had a comfortable middle class upbringing where religion was the focus of our lives and the economic system we live in was seen as inevitable.

I worked for a religious liberal charity for a year and then went to an extremely middle class university where I don't think I was challenged. I was already far to the left of many of my peers, but for the first two years still actually a liberal social democrat.

As I was radicalised by comrades in the student movement I slowly began to realise the scale and nature of the forces that were in opposition to human liberation. I became a proper anti-capitalist socialist but without firm or developed ideas. I went around doing what I thought was sensible without any sort of "plan".

I saw groups on the organised left, but I didn't think they had much of a "plan", either. The groups I came into contact with were mainly in the business of opposing the status quo without offering real alternatives — and I think this is partly where Workers' Liberty's disagreements with other British revolutionary socialists arise — on imperialism and the third camp.

I recognised a "rainbow coalition" approach without knowing that term. A bit of radical feminism here, a bit of Chomsky there, and that seemed to be satisfactory for some, but it wasn't good enough because it didn't add up to a "plan" for revolutionary change led by the working class. Everything was about building for the next demo, but what were our ideas? Where were we going? What were we proposing as alternatives?

The pamphlet *The Case for Socialist Feminism* changed my life. I'd been a committed feminist for years and years, but I didn't understand how it fitted into class politics. This pamphlet answered so many of the questions I had. And it made me more interested in studying socialism.

Comrades in the AWL were the first people to really force me to think about socialism. No one before had been bold enough to just tell me I was wrong or question me. Some people find this kind of thing incredibly uncomfortable. It is an uncomfortable process to realise just how wrong you are and how little you know. But it is absolutely necessary, and I would rather know how much I don't know than plough on in darkness. Being challenged is a very, very good thing, and something revolutionary socialists must get used to.

I still couldn't really be bothered to join though!

However after university, I went through a small personal hell which I won't go into, and also ended up unemployed at my parents' house without the means to support myself. Being unemployed, even for a short amount of time and even in the grand comfort of my parents' house, was horribly demoralising, depressing and vile. And after signing

onto a government programme to apply for 20 jobs a week, I eventually got a part-time job through nepotism and luck.

Working for a small business, and out of study, I started to understand labour alienation. I'd had jobs before but they were short-term, and there was always more education to go into afterwards. This, now, was my life, at least until I got a new job. Being a proletarian made me into a better revolutionary, because things I understood vaguely in theory became real things in my life. From the abstract, something that happens to "other people", it was happening to me. I was marketing my labour power, selling my labour and taking home a wage that had no relationship to the amount of profit I was making for the business.

I eventually got a job in London. I was working long, long hours, sleeping on my friends' sofa, and being consistently treated like shit by my boss. This deepened my desire to become educated, it made me understand further the role of the working class in revolution and socialism and that, essentially, is why I joined when I did.

I am very glad I joined. Being in the group has provided me with a structure that makes me more useful, a systematic educational process, opportunities to develop my ideas and learn. At the same time as learning, though, I'm still an activist and still impart things I know about to others.

I joined because I broadly agreed with Workers' Liberty's politics, the project they (we) propose, and because I was serious about making that happen. I would urge comrades who are close to us to think about this and become members.

nist parties in colonial and semi-colonial countries had to carry out this vital work. Zetkin was refreshingly candid about the challenges faced. She argued: “In the countries of the East, women live and work overwhelmingly under patriarchal and precapitalist forms of social life, bending under prejudices grey with age, oppressed by social institutions, by religion, customs and habits”.

The German Communist Hertha Sturm gave a sober assessment of the state of the international’s women’s work. She told the congress, “we have a certain gauge in the number of women members in the Communist Parties... perhaps ten per cent”. She advocated small party schools for women comrades and pointed to an extensive women’s press in the International, mentioning Communist Women’s International; the Dutch *De Voorbode* [*The Herald*]; *Žena* [*Woman*] in Czechoslovakia; *L’Ouvrière* [*Women Worker*] in France; and *Compagna* [*Woman Comrade*] in Italy. Sturm urged delegates to carry out “the decisions of the women’s conference last year and the World Congress, women’s supplements must be added to all party publications”.

Other speakers explained what women’s organisations had done in Russia. Sofia Smidovich recalled that in 1917, the *Woman Worker* was published in Petrograd, while a review appeared in Moscow, called *Working Women’s Life*. The Russian Communist Party central committee was in 1922 publishing two magazines for women workers. Varsenika Kasparova reminded delegates that women across the globe suffered from “particularly oppressive subjugation”. She said the Comintern was about creating an “an intelligentsia of revolutionary women” to fight for women’s liberation and socialism.

The Comintern continued the policy of earlier socialists (with Zetkin the most prominent living link), where mass parties included all kinds of sections and sub-organisations, and saw the women’s movement as existing with limited organisational autonomy within the party. The Comintern perspective was for mass Communist Parties to build mass Communist women’s movements, in competition with bourgeois feminist movements.

Today, in the absence of mass revolutionary parties and with very different women’s movements, to proclaim abstractly the need for a communist women’s movement would be meaningless. Equally to argue that there are “no special women questions” is also wrong — specific oppression outside of the capital-labour relationship is incontestable.

A Marxist approach to the women’s movement today is very different compared to the 1920s. Today small Marxist propaganda groups support and intervene in the existing amorphous feminist/women’s movement, arguing for Marxist politics in women’s movement campaigns and to show the class nature of “the women question”. We fight for a women’s movement that is led by class-conscious Marxists, but such a movement would have organisational autonomy

from Marxist organisation.

Alongside specific political demands, the main transitional demand for this conception is to fight for a mass working class-based women’s movement, focusing on the need for the women’s movement to orientate to working class women. However the Comintern emphasis on separate women’s committees and fractions within the party (and by extension within labour movement organisations), women’s papers, women’s schools and other measures to create a cadre of Marxist women, retain their full force.

The Fourth Congress held a discussion on black liberation.

A US delegate Otto Huiswoud remarked in the ‘Report on the Black Question’ that “the Second International is an International of white workers and the Communist International is an International of the workers of the world”. The verdict appears a little harsh: after all it was the Amsterdam conference in 1904 that one prominent Comintern delegate Katayama Sen from Japan had embraced Georgi Plekhanov from Russia, just as the Russian and Japanese states went to war. The same conference applauded Dadhabhai Naoroji, founder and president of the Indian National Congress and condemned English rule of India.

But Huiswoud was not indulging in exaggeration. In fact Comintern discussions in the early 1920s completely transformed conceptions of anti-racism and black liberation.

BROKE

James P Cannon recalled how American Communists broke with the socialist and radical tradition, which had no special programme on the black question.

It was considered simply as an economic problem, part of the struggle between the workers and the capitalists. As Eugene Debs, the best of the earlier socialists, put it in the language of the time, “We have nothing special to offer the Negro”.

Cannon wrote: “The American communists in the early days, under the influence and pressure of the Russians in the Comintern, were slowly and painfully learning to change their attitude; to assimilate the new theory of the Negro question as a special question of doubly-exploited second-class citizens, requiring a programme of special demands as part of the overall programme—and to start doing something about it” (*The Russian Revolution and the Black Struggle in the United States*, 1959).

During the Second Congress discussion of the colonial question in 1920, US delegate John Reed passed a note to Lenin, asking if this would be an appropriate occasion to speak on blacks in the US Lenin’s written reply was, “Yes, absolutely necessary.” Reed delivered a powerful indictment of racist oppression in the United States.

At the Fourth Congress, a commission chaired by Huiswoud drafted theses on the black question. Another American, the poet Claude McKay who was not a party member was nevertheless seated as a guest, invited to commission meetings, and asked, along with Huiswoud, to address a plenary session of the congress. The resolution did not break great theoretical ground, but did include the demand for an international conference of black people.

The final draft dropped a clause saying that “work among blacks should be carried out primarily by blacks” and was replaced by a pledge to struggle for full equality and equal political and social rights for black people.

There were other issues of racism discussed. William Earsman from Australia said “the main difficulty we must overcome is the prejudices aroused among white workers by the fear of cheap coloured labour”.

Tahar Boudengha from Tunisia denounced the chauvinism of the French party’s members in Algeria. He read a resolution adopted by a settler-dominated Communist conference in North Africa, which stated: “The native population of North Africa can only be liberated by the revolution in France. The native masses have been subjugated for centuries in a status of half-slavery. They are fanatical and fatalistic, patient and resigned, oppressed and imbued with religious prejudices. At this time, they still cannot imagine their liberation... It is entirely unnecessary to publish calls to rebellion in our press or distribute Arabic-language leaflets”.

Claude McKay

The attitude of the Comintern was unequivocally against racist and colonialist attitudes among workers in general and Communists in particular. Trotsky addressed Boudengha’s point in his speech on France. He said: “Not for a single hour, not for a single minute, should we tolerate the presence in the party of comrades who think like slave-owners and want [French President] Poincaré to hold the indigenous people under the benevolent rule of capitalist civilisation”.

Cannon registered the change of attitude. He wrote: “The influence of Lenin and the Russian Revolution... and then filtered through the activities of the Communist Party in the United States, contributed more than any other influence from any source to the recognition, and more or less general acceptance, of the Negro question as a special problem of American society — a problem which cannot be simply subsumed under the general heading of the conflict between capital and labour, as it

SWP: criticise, don't "no-platform"

Left

By Martin Thomas



Solidarity has criticised the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) on its handling of allegations of sexual harassment and then of rape brought by a young woman member of the SWP against leading SWP organiser Martin Smith.

The SWP leadership's approach, over two years and more, was to steer as near as it could to bureaucratic brush-off. The case is not closed: the woman involved should have the option of an independent investigation by labour-movement people unconnected with the SWP, and with some legal qualifications.

Some on the left have attempted to "no-platform" the SWP — for example, shouting down speakers on demonstrations who are SWP members. We disagree. The SWP must be confronted politically, not "no platformed".

The Glasgow protest against the bedroom tax at Easter, several thousand strong and the largest such demonstration in Britain, was disrupted by people (mainly young women) trying to shout down an SWP speaker. Some were violently harassed by SWP stewards, who told them to "go back to their rape demo", and attempted to get the police to remove them.

The SWP speaker was Dave Sherry, a member of the SWP Disputes Committee. We understand why people object to someone so complicit in the SWP leadership's handling of the issue.

But shouting down SWP speakers, even Disputes Committee members, will not improve the culture of our movement, or making it more safe and welcoming for women.

In Scotland, some members of ex-members of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) have an added edge to their anger against the SWP because of memories of the destructive 2006 split in SWP, when the SWP sided with Tommy Sheridan.

At a demonstration in York on 6 April, anarchists and Maoist-Stalinists harassed SWPers and in one case spat at an SWPer. An AWL activist running for election in a Unison branch recently was denounced by some because her sup-

porters in the election included SWPers. One union branch has voted not to affiliate to the West of Scotland anti-bedroom-tax campaign on the sole grounds that the SWP has influence in it. Some union branches have seen moves to oust SWPers from office.

The shouting-down and spitting disrupt the labour and socialist movement rather than helping it develop a better culture on issues of women's rights and gender violence. Often, in unions, such responses will play into the hands of the right wing, which has no better attitude or record than the SWP on women's rights. A union branch which disaffiliates from a broad campaign because of SWP influence is less, not more, able to make that campaign hospitable for women.

Some of those wanting to "no-platform" the SWP learned this approach in the SWP itself, which has a long habit of trying to deal with political issues by anathemas and exclusions.

The International Socialist Group (ISG) in Scotland was formed by people who split from the SWP only in early 2011 (when the Smith scandal was already brewing: there is no evidence that the people now in the ISG did anything specially good on the issue when they were in the SWP).

APPROACH

The SWP's own approach is now coming back on them. For example, the SWP and the AWL disagree on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The AWL argues that a workable and democratic settlement must recognise the rights to self-determination of both nations, Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, and must therefore be a "two states" formula (a real one, not the Israeli government's hypocritical "two states", meaning all power to Israel and parcelled bantustans for the Palestinians). The SWP argues that justice for the Palestinians can be achieved only by conquering Israel and subsuming its people into an Arab state.

We've seen the SWP, not in an over-excited outburst by some young activist but in an official letter signed by Alex Callinicos, hyping this up into an absurd claim that the AWL "supports the Israeli state's terror against the Palestinian people". The outrage is selective: the SWP is relaxed about cooperating with people who really do support the Chinese state's repression of the people of Tibet. The hype serves not to give

Confront the SWP politically

due urgency to debate, but to replace it by curses ("Zionists!" "racists!").

The ISG writes that the way the SWP handled the scandal "replicated the culture of... rape apologetics". On the streets, that translates into broadside denunciation of SWPers as "rape apologists".

There is a reasonable case for the labour movement and the left not accepting Martin Smith, in particular, as an organiser and a representative until some better tribunal than the SWP Disputes Committee has delivered a verdict. And, in fact, despite protesting that Smith remains "in good standing", the SWP CC has quietly pulled him out of public organising roles.

The investigation by the SWP's Disputes Committee, all of whose members knew Smith well, was unsatisfactory. But the wider left is even less equipped to deliver a verdict than the SWP's Disputes Committee was. Smith, like any other similarly accused, should be considered innocent until proven guilty.

Something like half the active SWP membership came out in one degree or another of opposition to the SWP Central Committee's handling of the case.

Other SWPers backed the CC because, despite everything, they believed the Disputes Committee. Or because they were persuaded by the Central Committee's cursing of its critics as feminists who had ceased to look to the working class, or as semi-anarchists. Such wrong attitudes do not make them "rape apologists". Their attitudes can be changed by serious argument, not by shouting and spitting, and not by tactics which help the right wing.

The self-righteousness of the ISG does no service to women's rights. As well as criticising the SWP, the AWL has also attempted self-examination. How would we have dealt with similar allegations in our own organisation? Even the best political positions and education programmes are no guarantee against individual abuse. Do we have strong enough safeguards against the sort of lower-grade wrongdoing which seems to have formed the background to the Smith scandal: older activists using their "prestige" in political activity for sexual advantage with young members and contacts?

Attempts to "no-platform" the SWP cut against that sort of self-examination and against the rational argument — sharp and angry where necessary — by which alone the labour movement can progress.

Russian soldiers entering Germany at the end of World War Two raped as many as two million German women. In east Berlin some 100,000 women were raped, and up to 10,000 died as a result (Antony Beevor: *Berlin: The Downfall*). Communist Party activists across the world denied these facts or tried to explain them away. Trotskyists vehemently criticised the CPs, but they still sought to work with rank-and-file CP workers in the labour movement where there was common ground, and to re-educate them.

In 2001 the SWP openly "explained away" the Taliban's abuse of women in Afghanistan (SW, 6 October 2001). The AWL criticised the SWP, but did not rally against the SWP in any way that could help the "bomb Afghanistan" brigade, then in full flood after the Twin Towers atrocity. We sought to discuss with and convince SWP members of the wrongness of their politics.

We should be criticising, debating with, and politically confronting the SWP in an attempt to persuade activists and clean up the culture of our movement.

For five years the ruling class, in Britain and worldwide, has been using the crisis of their system to their advantage — to right roughshod over our living standards, rights and resistance.

To turn around the labour movement, we need to turn around the left. Is Marxism discredited, or does Marxism need to be renewed? Join the discussion.

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Has Syria's democratic revolution been hijacked?

We print US socialist Pham Binh's criticism of the AWL's analysis and attitude on Syria. The article originally appeared on the North Star website [northstar.info].

As the Syrian revolution progresses, support for it abroad among Marxists recedes. [This shift to the right] parallels the evolution of petty-bourgeois Arab intellectuals such as Jadiliya who supported Syria's peaceful demonstrators but recoiled in fear when these same demonstrators grew tired of being cut down by machine gun fire and took up arms to defend themselves.

If the revolution's unavoidable militarisation repelled these intellectuals, the militarised revolution's "Islamisation" repelled Marxists like AWL, CWI, and As'ad AbuKhalil, the Angry (but not intelligent) Arab.

Underlying these shifts is the question of method.

How do we determine when a struggle's political and class content changes from being progressive and worth supporting into its opposite, into something unworthy of support? When does quantity (the number of reactionary forces like Islamist extremists or salafis) become quality (the predominance of these forces smothering the revolution's democratic character)? What role do Islamist forces play in the Syrian revolution, how dominant are they, and how have they altered the revolution's political physiognomy?

These are important questions that the AWL raises explicitly and answers earnestly. Although AWL's answers conflate worst-case possibilities with existing realities, they deserve credit for approaching the Syrian revolution in this manner instead of using each new development to vindicate a fixed party line. Historical materialism is not about having the right answers; rather, it is about asking the right questions and then vigorously interrogating the available facts and evidence to formulate provisional conclusions that can serve as a guide to action.

A four-point resolution passed by AWL's National Committee states the following:

1. We oppose the brutal war being waged against the Syrian people by the Ba'thist state.

2. We are for freedom, democracy, women's and workers' rights, and democratic rights for Syria's national minorities. We are for the right of Kurdish self-determination, including the right of Syria's Kurdish areas to secede.

3. We oppose all manifestations of Islamism amongst the Syrian political opposition and rebel militias. Given the fragmented and often increasingly religiously radical nature of the opposition, a victory for the opposition against the state is likely to lead to ethnic cleansing and warlordism as Syria descends into chaos and breaks apart.

We specifically back democratic and working-class elements.

We will avoid, in our slogans and propaganda, any idea that a victory for one or some of the currently powerful opposition militias against the Ba'thists will be a positive step forward.

4. As a consequence, while maintaining our right to criticise and our political independence, we will not necessarily denounce a political agreement between the Ba'thists and the rebels that avoids the collapse of Syrian society into warlordism.

CHANGE

AWL's resolution appears beneath the text of an article entitled "Deadlock in Syria" that provides some flesh to the bare-bones reasoning contained in the resolution.

According to AWL, there was a qualitative change in the Syrian revolution's political character during 2012 with the rise of Islamist forces:

"The rebellion began in March 2011 with street demonstrations mostly expressing a non-sectarian, secular, and democratic impulse. But initiative and power in the anti-Assad movement has increasingly passed into the hands of Sunni-Islamist militias funded by Saudi Arabia or Qatar, or led by jihadists from outside the country who have entered Syria to join the conflict.

"[W]hen the mass of opposition opinion was able to express itself, in the early demonstrations, it was mainly secular, non-sectarian, and democratic. There may be small groups within the opposition of a democratic and working-

class character. They are the people with the key to the future. But Syria's working class has been atomised and suppressed by the Ba'thist dictatorship for generations. If those democratic and working-class groups exist, we don't know about them."

The most serious problem with this characterisation is that the peaceful, secular-democratic mass demonstrations AWL lauds never ceased. Every week for over two years Syrians have defied airstrikes, snipers, shelling, and snitches to peacefully demonstrate against the regime in war zones (Aleppo) and regime strongholds (Damascus) alike. Footage of daily demonstrations is uploaded to YouTube on channels such as SyrianDaysOfRage and Souria2011archives.

Have the slogans changed? Of course. Chants of "the people demand the downfall of the regime" and "get out Bashar" are now mixed with demands for arms, condemnations of the international community for fiddling while Syria burns, expressions of faith such as "God is great," and, occasionally, Islamist chants like "the people want the declaration of Jihad" or "the Ummah wants an Islamic Caliphate." Marchers often wave the black flag of Islam alongside the pre-Ba'athist flag of the revolution.

This where AWL's condemnation of "all manifestations of Islamism" leads them astray, as if proclaiming the greatness of Allah in and of itself is a demand for a Saudi-style Caliphate rather than "the sigh of the oppressed creature" and "the spirit of spiritless conditions." Union soldiers marched to their deaths battling the Confederacy with God on their lips as they sang the "Battle Hymn of the Republic;" would we characterise these soldiers politically as Billy Graham-style Christian conservatives? Similarly, mosques and Friday prayers have been irreplaceable vehicles for mobilising the masses to demonstrate for freedom in the Libyan, Egyptian, Yemeni, Syrian, and Bahraini revolutions — do these count as "manifestations of Islamism" to be condemned and combated rather than encouraged and developed?

AWL's resolution is vague precisely where it needs to be explicit and sweeping where it needs to be nuanced.

Crying out "God is great" as the Assad regime bombs Aleppo University and attacks civilian neighborhoods with Scud missiles is akin to saying "oh my God" as the Twin Towers crumbled on September 11, 2001 — it is a universal, human reaction to wanton death and destruction.

Assad loyalists scream "we give our lives for you, oh Bashar" as they fight in addition to psychologically torturing captured revolutionaries into saying blasphemous phrases such as "Assad is great" (the US employed similar tactics at Guantanamo Bay). Shouting "God is great" in response is not simply an affirmation of faith, it is a statement of resistance, of defiance, of allegiance to a power higher and greater than a miserable bloodthirsty dictator who ruled Syria with God-like authority over morality, law, economics, politics, religious matters, the public sphere, the private sphere, and life and death.

The "Islamisation" of the Syrian uprising in 2012 was the result of two factors: the increasingly desperate and brutal nature of the armed struggle on the one hand and the historically unprecedented international isolation of the revolution on the other.

While Western imperialists refused to arm the FSA, the Islamist Gulf states armed their ideological counterparts. While

foreign leftists poured over rumors of imperialist intervention that never materialised, hundreds of foreign Islamists poured onto the battlefield to fight the regime. Given this, it should be no surprise that revolutionary Syrians prefer to sing songs honoring Allah and his devout followers at their demonstrations instead of the International.

The longer and more agonising the overthrow of Assad, the more martyrs there will be; the more martyrs there are, the greater the revolution's religious overtones; the greater the religious overtones, the greater the influence of Islamists. This tendency will hold true unless and until states and/or grassroots organisations abroad deliver aid to secular-democratic forces such as the FSA or the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), providing them with the resources to compete with the Islamists for mass influence. Only deeds can tilt the balance of forces in Syria away from the Islamists towards the "democratic and working-class elements" AWL "specifically back[s]."

Understanding how previously marginal Islamist forces — extremist salafis, conservatives, and moderates — became prominent players is the precondition for discerning how dominant they are today and assessing whether they have successfully hijacked the democratic revolution.

AWL correctly notes the "increasingly religiously radical nature of the opposition" and that "initiative and power in the anti-Assad movement has increasingly passed into the hands of Sunni-Islamist militias funded by Saudi Arabia or Qatar, or led by jihadists from outside the country."

However, the conclusion drawn from these accurate observations — that "a victory for the opposition against the state is likely to lead to ethnic cleansing and warlordism as Syria descends into chaos and breaks apart" — does not follow. To talk about Syria's descent into warlordism, ethnic cleansing, and partition after the regime's inevitable demise is to engage in nightmarish speculation. Lenin warned such an approach, arguing that "in assessing a given situation, a Marxist must proceed not from what is possible, but from what is real."

In the past two years, there have been no sectarian massacres except those committed by the regime and its supporters against Syria's (and the revolution's) Sunni majority. Revolutionary Syria is not occupied Iraq.

NOT IRAQ

Despite the regime's relentless propaganda campaign to demonise the opposition as sectarian and genocidal towards non-Sunnis and despite massacres by Assad's forces of Sunnis at Houla, Aleppo, Al-Qubair, Samlaka in Damascus, and Arbaeen in Hama, the opposition has not retaliated against Christian, Druse, Kurdish, Alawi, or Ismaili communities as Iraq's Shia death squads retaliated against Sunni civilians after Al-Qaeda's massive car bombings of Shia markets and squares.

This is not to deny that sectarianism is an ongoing problem for and a constant danger to the revolution. However, the regime's failure to spark a sectarian cycle of violence by repeatedly massacring of Sunni civilians shows that, although the opposition is disproportionately Sunni, its aspirations remain national rather than confessional in nature. If the AWL was correct in claiming the opposite, would representatives of the Alawi community meet in Cairo to call for Assad's downfall, assert that "this revolution is for all Syrians," and appeal to Alawi military personnel to mutiny?

The Assad regime was built on a sectarian basis to withstand exactly the kind a popular uprising that is now underway. Given this starting point, what is remarkable about the Syrian revolution is not its sectarianism but its anti-sectarianism, its dogged refusal to play into Assad's hands and allow the regime to pose as the last line of defense for minority faiths. The masses have become too conscious, too politically enlightened, have shed too much blood, and have struggled too hard for too long for the revolution's lofty ideals to debase themselves by falling for the regime's divide-and-rule schemes. That is why they voted by the thousands for "There Will Be No Sectarian State in Syria" to be the slogan of all the Friday protests held across the country on March 8, 2013.

Continued from page 9

AWL's dire post-revolutionary forecasts do not appear to be based on a careful analysis of the 68 towns and cities that have been liberated from regime control.

These areas are ruled by a (sometimes overlapping and competing) patchwork of civilian and military councils, only some of which have a pronounced Islamist character. In Idlib, Islamists were frozen out of the civilian leadership bodies. In Kafranbel, a town famous for its humorous and sharp slogans attacking Assad, the international community, and at times even the opposition's exiled leadership, the local council is drafting a secular constitution to create an interim civilian legal authority. In Aleppo, a coalition of salafi, conservative, and moderate Islamists have formed a judiciary called Hayaa al-Sharia to combat criminality and arbitrate disputes among the population.

Thus far, Hayaa al-Sharia has not acted in a sectarian manner by persecuting members of minority communities, and the same is true of the Islamist judiciary bodies that have sprung up elsewhere in the country. When self-appointed Islamists authorities have acted to repress women or political opponents, they have met resistance in the form of peaceful protests, a kind of revolution within the revolution. They have generally relented and released whomever they arrested instead of using deadly force against demonstrators.

Studying areas where opposition militias have been victorious over the regime reveals a picture that has nothing in common with the bleak predictions of AWL. Instead of a Taliban-style salafi dystopia rife with sectarian killings, persecution of minority religious and national groups, and apolitical warlordism, liberated areas are governed fairly effectively by a mix of secular and Islamist elements, the latter of which range from moderate to conservative. Even in areas such as Aleppo where conservative Islamists are strongest, their predominance is contested at best and contingent upon the extreme and unusual conditions created by the revolution.

Despite their vanguard role on the battlefield, Islamist chants and slogans at demonstrations calling for a Caliphate are not terribly popular. Proposed Islamist slogans for the weekly Friday protests such as "Armies of Islam: Rescue Syria" are regularly defeated by thousands-strong majority

votes. Here, it is important to draw a distinction between religious terminology and Islamist politics (a distinction Islamists prefer to blur); "God Is Great" is not a political program whereas "Islam Is the Answer" strongly suggests one. As the Assad regime stepped up its murderous repression in 2012, the Friday slogans became increasingly religious (invoking the name of Allah and appealing to the ummah for help) but not Islamist (advocating Sharia law, a Caliphate, or jihad). Revolutionary Syrians respect the fearless heroism of the mujahadeen on the battlefield but do not look to them for leadership on the political field or for ideas about good governance.

To sum up: the hijackers may be on board the plane but they are not in the cockpit and do not have their hands on the controls.

PROGRESSIVE CONTENT?

AWL's conclusion that it can support neither side in Syria's civil war proceeds from the assumption that both sides are equally reactionary from the consistently democratic standpoint of the working class, that the choice between Assad's tyranny and Islamist tyranny is no choice at all.

This equivalence is false and not only because liberated areas are far from being Islamist tyrannies. One side in the Syrian civil war tortures children, the other does not; one side murders and tortures peaceful demonstrators, the other does not; one side drops bombs on universities and fires Scud missiles at civilian neighborhoods, the other does not; one side massacres hundreds of civilians of a particular sect, the other does not; one side relies on fear and terror to keep its troops from defecting, the other does not.

Acknowledging that one side of this war is progressive does not mean that all the forces and people fighting on that side are candidates for sainthood or guaranteed to be free of reactionary agendas. It does not mean that the progressive side of this war is free of unjust executions, torture, beheadings, looting, banditry, and sectarian tendencies. It simply means that the interests of working people and democracy demands the victory of the Syrian opposition, however tainted and corrupted by Islamist extremists it may be. The choice today in Syria is not between the lesser of two evils but between good and evil, progress and reaction, revolution

and counter-revolution, democratism and barbarism, and socialists have a duty to ensure by any and all means that the right side wins even if tomorrow's enemy is temporarily on the same side as us today.

As the regime collapses, the struggle between fascism and democracy, between tyranny and freedom gives way to a new struggle over the democratic content and boundaries of that freedom. When the battle for democracy becomes superseded by the battle of democracy, this is the beginning of the second stage of the democratic revolution. Only during this second stage will the extent and depth of the democratic revolution's corruption and distortion by anti-democratic forces like Jabhat al-Nusra be revealed, and an armed struggle to crush and expunge them is inevitable if they try to replace Assad's despotism with their own.

It is during this second stage that the real fight over the rights of women, minority faiths and nationalities, workers, and free expression will begin. This battle will split the Islamist camp, pitting salafis like Jabhat al-Nusra who oppose free elections against moderates like Muslim Brotherhood who support them. There can be no question of neutrality in this second stage of the revolution just as there should no question of neutrality in its current, first stage. AWL's failure to distinguish between semi-political Muslims, moderate and conservative Islamists, and extremist salafis is a failure to anticipate the central fault line that is already emerging in liberated areas and will become even more pronounced as the regime is uprooted and destroyed city by city, block by block, soldier by soldier.

Only by doing all that we can now during the revolution's first stage, no matter how small it might seem in the big scheme of things, can we hope to influence the outcome of the revolution's second stage so that Syria's workers, women, and minority groups are in the best position possible to organize and fight for their interests against bosses, patriarchs, national chauvinists, and reactionary clerics.

Retreating into neutrality now because heavily armed bearded men are increasingly prominent on the battlefield today is to turn our backs on the revolution, and with it, the only chance the Syrian people have for free and better lives tomorrow.

Hollywood homophobia and economic crisis

Eric Lee



Four years ago, the stars of the successful BBC comedy series *Gavin and Stacey* made the mistake of starring in an abysmal comedy known as *Lesbian Vampire Killers*.

The movie was quickly forgotten, but I was reminded of it recently when I saw the latest — and last — film by acclaimed American director Steven Soderbergh, *Side Effects*.

Soderbergh's film could easily have been given a similar title, even though it was not in any sense a comedy. But the theme of homicidal lesbians is central to the plot, and the film absolutely reeks of homophobia.

Not everyone will have seen it that way, of course. When I first heard about the film, a reviewer talked about it revolving around a conspiracy in which the pharmaceutical industry played a key role.

The film's tagline was "one pill can change your life". The story seems at first to be about the side effects of a new antidepressant which may — or may not — have contributed to a young woman (played by Rooney Mara) murdering her husband (Channing Tatum), who has just returned home after a few years in jail.

Jude Law plays the psychiatrist who prescribes the medication, and later becomes a kind of amateur detective, determined to figure out what really happened.

So far, so good. What follows contains spoilers, so if you really want to see the film and don't want to know how it turns out, stop reading.

It turns out that the pharmaceutical company isn't a protagonist in the story, it's done nothing particularly wrong, and it doesn't even seem that the young woman took the pills.

It's not the "one pill" that changed her life, or ended the life of her unfortunate husband. It was the fact that she had



Catherine Zeta-Jones plays an "evil lesbian killer"

a lesbian relationship with her psychiatrist, who treated her for depression when her husband was taken away by the FBI.

The psychiatrist, played by Catherine Zeta-Jones, would not have been out of place in *Lesbian Vampire Killers*.

It is only at the end of the film that Mara's character confesses to Jude Law her motivation for killing the unfortunate Tatum.

She first became depressed when her bourgeois lifestyle ended suddenly as the FBI descended on a garden party to arrest Tatum on charges of insider trading.

Zeta-Jones seduced her vulnerable, and much younger, patient, and the two conspired — as lesbians do, apparently — to murder Tatum when he got home from prison.

Their relationship was kept a secret from everyone. And their motivation wasn't just love (or lust). There was some scheme to make a fortune by linking a pharmaceutical company to the crime, thereby driving its share price down and reaping millions on the stock market.

Near the very end of the film, Mara and Zeta-Jones meet up and embrace, discussing where the money has been

stashed — though at this point Mara has betrayed her lover, and is wearing a wire.

Some viewers and critics didn't see any of this as homophobic, but others certainly did.

If there were loads of films made by Hollywood A-listers in which the lead characters were lesbians, *Side Effects* would just be one forgettable movie in which the women were not very nice.

But how many Hollywood films with budgets of over \$30 million feature a lesbian couple at the centre of the story? Very few, I imagine. And the linking of forbidden love to murder is quite explicit in *Side Effects*.

It may not be obvious to British audiences, or even to the British leads in the film, but America is a deeply homophobic country which lags behind much of the world on issues like gay marriage or gays serving in the military.

Homophobia is explicitly used by the right in America, including even mainstream politicians like Mitt Romney. Where right-wing policies such as austerity or tax breaks for the very rich became unpopular, homophobia — like racism — becomes quite useful for the right.

It differs from most forms of bigotry in that it's still quite acceptable, it seems, to incorporate homophobic elements in a mainstream film. It would be hard (though not impossible) to do the same with more traditional prejudices, such as hatred of black people or Jews.

There was an uproar in America when Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* implied that torture was an important part of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. Right-wing politicians like John McCain led the charge on that one, and it's one of the reasons Bigelow's film couldn't be named "Best Picture" at the Oscars.

No one expects McCain, Romney and politicians like them to speak out against the homophobia in *Side Effects* — but one wonders why the left, in America and elsewhere, hasn't been more outspoken in taking on this vile, bigoted film.

Unison officials sabotage democracy

A worker involved with the "3 Cosas" campaign spoke to *Solidarity* about their fight for equal rights and union democracy.

"3 Cosas" ("Three Things") is a campaign organised by outsourced workers at the University of London, mainly cleaners in halls of residence and the university's flagship Senate House building, but also catering staff, post-room workers, and security workers.

The three things we're demanding are equal sick pay, pensions, and holiday rights with our colleagues who are employed directly by the university.

We're employed by Balfour Beatty (except catering staff, who are employed by Aramark) and come from a diverse range of backgrounds. We face all kinds of problems at work. We're not treated fairly, and there's a constant pressure from management to get the job done more quickly. We have to log in and log out, so we're monitored all the time and every minute is counted by management. If you work overtime, it's often not added to your pay packet

until the following month, which leads to a lot of problems for people. Aramark workers are on zero-hours contracts, which is a big problem. Aramark even forced some workers who had full-time contracts to switch to zero-hours or risk losing their jobs.

The "3 Cosas" campaign began around seven months ago. We won the London Living Wage in July 2012 after a very long campaign, so we decided to organise the "3 Cosas" campaign as the next step in the fight for equal rights.

UNISON

We were organised in Unison, and from the start we wanted our union branch to be the vehicle for organising the campaign.

We went to branch meetings and argued for the branch to launch a campaign, but our voices were ignored.

Officials in the branch wanted us to focus our demands on Balfour Beatty only, rather than the university management itself.

But we've always been clear that the University of London has the power to make the real decisions

about how its contractors treat their staff. When we couldn't get support from our union branch, we launched the campaign on a self-organised basis. We've consistently appealed to the branch for support but we've been ignored and undermined. Some people in the branch leadership see us as a threat to their control.

Our campaign is entirely led by the workers. We meet every week to discuss issues at work and make plans for the campaign.

In March, we stood a slate in the elections for the branch committee alongside our supporters amongst directly-employed university workers and University of

London Union officers. Our platform was to transform the Unison branch to make it more diverse, more reflective of the membership, and more responsive to the struggles we face. The outsourced workers make up a near majority of the branch membership, and we wanted that to be reflected in the way the branch was run.

BRANCH

Without consulting the wider branch membership, the branch committee handed over the running of the elections to the London regional office of Unison.

They totally messed it up; many workers didn't receive their ballot papers, and some received them in the wrong language. We were constantly pressuring London region to get it sorted, but they ignored us. They then declared the election result invalid because of errors with the distribution of ballot papers. They also cited a newspaper article, written by a student, as having undermined the election process, which is ridiculous as we can't control what external third parties write

about us. Unison officials sabotaged the election to stop a democratic transformation of the branch by grassroots members.

When we organised a demonstration outside Unison headquarters to demand that the election results were announced, Unison called the police.

Following this, we've had a series of meetings and assemblies to decide the way forward and a majority of outsourced workers have voted to withdraw our membership from Unison en masse and transfer to the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB). We see Unison as a dead end. We don't want to be trapped in an undemocratic union that won't back its members.

We're not stopping our campaign. People who want to support us, including people who are still in Unison or in other unions, should come to our protests, support our actions, and write to the Vice Chancellor of the University of London.

We think our campaign is a model for how outsourced workers can fight for equal rights.

• [facebook.com/3coca](https://www.facebook.com/3coca)

Civil servants continue strikes

By Ollie Moore

Civil servants continued their industrial action on pay cuts, pension reform, and job losses with two half-day strikes in April.

The campaign began with a national strike on 20 March. A half-day strike involving all Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) members, apart from HMRC and Home Office staff, followed on 5 April, with HMRC staff striking from 1pm on Monday 8 April. A planned 24-hour strike of

Home Office workers due for the same day was postponed following a legal challenge.

The campaign, which involves rolling and selective action as well as national strikes, is a departure from PCS's usual "strategy" of holding incidental one-day strikes separated by long periods of inactivity.

But rank-and-file civil servants need to make sure the strikes are controlled from the workplace level up, and that they are fought for real, concrete demands, rather than just to win

Camden workers fight contract cuts

By Darren Bedford

Local government workers in the London borough of Camden are facing an attempt by bosses to bribe them into signing new, worse, contracts.

The new contracts will increase working hours, and some staff are being told they could have to work as

late as 10pm, and at weekends. The new contracts also institute local bargaining, meaning workers would be outside any pay increases or improvements to conditions negotiated at a national level.

Following months of negotiations, management are offering a one-off payment of £1,000 to try and bribe workers to sign. A union

survey conducted in February 2013 showed that 97.5% of members thought the new contracts were worse than their current terms.

The Unison branch is currently running an indicative ballot for industrial action against the new contracts, which will conclude on Monday 22 April.

For more information, see camdenunison.org.uk

Safe spaces where we work

By a transport worker

Women transport workers have begun an effort to strengthen their union's policy on gender violence in the workplace.

Customer-facing transport workers often experience being grabbed or forcibly kissed by male passengers and, in a male-dominated industry, often feel unsupported in responding to the issues.

A motion written for Rail, Maritime, and Transport workers union (RMT) bodies says: "management and the police have a tendency to minimise these incidents as drunken laddishness, failing to give appropriate support.

"This culture can affect the way our women members assess what has happened. While we might feel deeply distressed, the environment encourages us to feel nothing serious has happened."

The motion would commit the union to ensuring "that women members subject to assaults such as this receive the full support of the union in dealing with the consequences".

It would also see the union "provide guidance and training for RMT representatives and branch officers, making it clear that the union expects them to take incidents like this seriously and to challenge the culture that allows them to happen."

LANAC makes plans

By an NUT conference delegate

At this year's National Union of Teachers conference (29 March—2 April, Liverpool), delegates debated what strategy the NUT should adopt in response to Michael Gove's attacks on teachers' pay.

The NUT Executive's priority motion promised a rolling programme of industrial action alongside NASUWT (Britain's other major teaching union), leading up to national action sometime in the autumn. But the proposal was devoid of strategy or even any concrete commitments about when action would take place, despite existing policy passed in 2012 committing the Executive to announcing specific calendars of action for industrial disputes.

An amendment to commit the union to a national strike on 26 June was defeated on conference floor. Workers' Liberty members had wanted a more comprehensive amendment setting out a wider plan of action.

Despite the setback in the pay debate, the Local Associations Network National Action Campaign (LANAC), a rank-and-file network within NUT, held two large fringe meetings both attended by between 100 and 150 people. It plans a steering committee meeting in Birmingham on 18 May and a national conference shortly afterwards.

The task for LANAC activists now is to build the regional strike on 27 June and make sure it has a national amplification by organising protests and other actions elsewhere on the same day.

LANAC will also be pushing the Executive to stop ignoring agreed union policy by refusing to name an explicit calendar of action.

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

Behind Korea's war threats

In early April North Korea declared that it was cancelling the armistice which ended the 1950s Korean war and was "in a state of war" with South Korea. It threatened to hit the USA with nuclear weapons.

It has withdrawn 50,000 North Korean workers from a special industrial zone which is on the northern side of the Korean border but houses South Korean companies.

No-one knows what North Korea may do further. The 86-year-old Fidel Castro has called the situation "incredible and absurd", and urged North Korea to restraint, while also denouncing any US military action.

We know something of what North Korea is like as a state. In the first place, Kim Jong Un, the third in a dynasty of Stalinist rulers, can declare war without any chance for the people of North Korea to express an opinion.

A report by David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag* (2003), describes North Korea's system of prison camps.

150,000 to 200,000 people are held in forced labour camps without legal process

Preparing for war?

or right of appeal. In most cases the reason is some sort of association with dissent.

It may be singing a South Korean pop song. Or being found to have parents who dissented. Or showing insufficient respect for the works of Kim Il Sung.

The routine is to put not only the offender, but three generations of the offender's family, in the camps, and to keep them there indefinitely.

Prisoners are made to do forced labour, to subsist on very little food, to do public self-criticism sessions, and to observe public executions within the camp of prison-

ers deemed to have misbehaved.

We know about this from former camp guards who have escaped across North Korea's long border into China, and prisoners who occasionally get out. A Venezuelan Communist Party member who went to North Korea to do the official translation into Spanish of Kim Il Sung's works, and then fell into disfavour, was eventually released after diplomatic pressure from Venezuela.

North Korea also has labour camps for prisoners jailed after trials, for definite terms, and for specified offences. Those "offences"

may include absence from work, or leaving one's home village without permission. A common "offence" is having fled to China and been recaptured.

Women prisoners who are pregnant on being returned from China are routinely subjected to forced abortions, or having their babies killed immediately after birth on the grounds that they might be Chinese-fathered.

We must oppose use of North Korea's warmongering to strengthen US militarism — but without any shade or hint of apology for Kim Jong Un's tyranny.

Portuguese government plans new cuts

On 5 April the Portuguese constitutional court ruled that some of the sweeping new government cuts (to holiday bonuses for civil servants and pensioners, unemployment and sickness benefits) were unlawful (5 April) were unlawful.

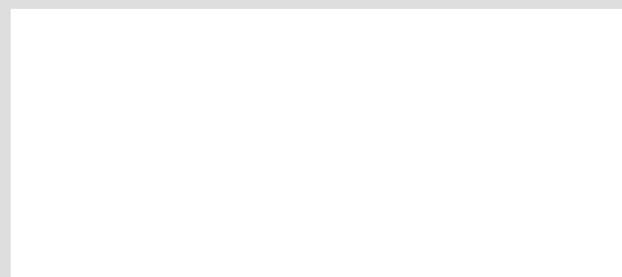
But Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho responded by reiterating his right-wing government's intention to make the cuts. He says cuts are obligatory under the terms of an €78 billion EU/IMF bailout deal.

The court held that the tax rises which will take place under the 2013 budget are legal.

The government survived a no confidence vote on Wednesday 3 April, tabled by the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party had asked the EU for a bailout in March 2011, but now they say Coelho's Social Democrats, the main governing party, are cutting too fast. Since 2011 €13 billion in cuts — the equivalent of 8% of output — has been made.

There have been big street protests against the cuts and in November there was a general strike by workers demanding an end to economic hardship.

There were 3,000 demonstrations in Portugal in 2012, compared with 708 in the previous year. There is a continuing campaign against water privatisation. And the latest anti-government strikes, in March, involved many thousands of workers across the country and included rail and



Demonstration against Coelho's cuts

airline strikes.

Official forecasts suggest the Portuguese economy will shrink by 2.3% this year, following a 3.2% contraction in 2012.

Unemployment in the Euro-area reached a record high at the start of 2013, at 12%, or 19.1 million workers. Particularly badly hit are Greece, Cyprus, Spain and Portugal. In Greece and Spain youth unemployment is over 50%. And in Portugal the general jobless rate is now 17%, or nearly one million people.

More than 2% of Portugal's population — mainly young and well-educated people — have emigrated in the last two years.

Justice for Steven Simpson!

By Maxi B

Content Warning: Contains Description Of An Ableist/Homophobic Killing.

In the early hours of 23 June 2012, Steven Simpson was set on fire by 20 year old Jordan Sheard, who had gate-crashed his house party in Cudworth near Barnsley.

Steven had been verbally abused, stripped of his clothes and had phrases like "I love dick" and "gay boy" scrawled across his body. He was then doused in tanning oil, Sheard lit his crotch with a cigarette lighter and the flames engulfed his body.

Those involved fled as Simpson's neighbour tried desperately to put out the flames. Simpson died the next day after enduring 60% burns to his body.

Steven Simpson's murder was the result of the hatred and humiliation caused to him because of his sexuality and his disability [Asperger's]. He was bullied, dehumanised and then killed. It follows the format of many killings of LGBTQ people worldwide.

Sheffield Crown Court's view on the matter has been frankly disgusting. Judge Roger Keen dismissed the crime as a "good-natured horseplay" that had gone too far, and sentenced Sheard to a unusually short sentence of three and a half years in prison. Sheard's defence lawyer called what happened to Simpson a "stupid prank that went wrong in a bad way".

This was clearly a hate crime. Simpson was being taunted for his sexuality and his disability. He was devalued so much in the eyes of those involved that they thought setting him on fire was somehow acceptable. He was a bright young man studying at Barnsley College but his last moments alive on this earth must have been dehumanising, painful and terrifying.

DISMISS

How Judge Roger Keen can dismiss this so flip-pantly as "horseplay" is beyond me.

He is re-enforcing the same notions that lead to Steven's death: that homophobic bullying is fun, rather than a crime against LGBTQ people, that it is okay to mock or take advantage of someone's disability rather than looking out for them and treating them with respect, that setting someone on fire and burning them to death is "a joke too far" rather than one of the inevitable consequences of the way we still treat people like Steven in our society.

It makes me sick to the stomach to think someone so young has been killed because he was different — and the frightening fact is that could have been any one of us that lives with a disability or who is LGBTQ. Many have commented on the lenient sentencing of Steven's killer. However, I think this misses the point. The point here is that the criminal justice system is complicit in the oppression of LGBTQ people and disabled people when it makes comments like those of Judge Keen's. It is churning out the very same ideas that lead to hate crime.

It is not a joke, funny or horseplay to treat someone in the way Steven was. If we condone this behaviour we are sending out the message that LGBTQ people and disabled people are fair game to be bullied and preyed upon. We are sending out the message that it's okay for other young people to do what was done to Steven. It appears it is all okay with Judge Keen, just as long as you don't kill someone.

But the point is that the way Steven was killed was precisely a result of how he was treated. If he had just been treated like any other young person, with a bit of decency or respect, it would never have happened.

This is the message that Sheffield Crown Court should have put out. We should condemn Judge Keen's remarks, call for him to make an apology and call for Sheffield Crown Court to recognise the daily battle people like Steven face because of their sexuality and their disability.

Steven's death should serve as a reminder of what our LGBTQ and disabled youth face today.

• Taken from marxistqueen.wordpress.com