

solidarity
with haitian
workers!
page 4



the global
commune
pages 6-7



the winter of
discontent
page 11



the ★ commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below issue 11, february 2010 £1

against borders and bureaucrats

self-organised migrant workers across europe show how to resist the recession

The Labour government has declared that the recession is over. But many of the worst cuts, and the sharpest onslaught on working-class living standards, are yet to bite.

Particularly exposed to this ruling-class offensive are migrant workers, none more so than those without the 'right' legal papers.

Precarious employment conditions matched with unstable immigration status is a recipe for exploitation. What better example could there be of the injustice of today's capitalism than migrants having to work overnight, on minimum wage – or even less – cleaning the offices of millionaire bankers who are up to their eyeballs in bonuses?

The current onslaught against migrants is also taking place on a more 'political level'. The economic crisis is fuelling xenophobia and racism as, for want of any credible alternative to the capitalist system which caused the recession, many look for scapegoats.

But for The Commune, such workers are not only the deserving subjects of sympathetic anti-racist propaganda. They are showing the whole class how to resist the recession.



6,000 migrant workers have been in dispute in france since mid-october: see page 5

The crisis is real, but the idea of recession is employed for all manner of attacks on living standards and our rights in the workplace. It is a catch-all excuse, employed by bosses and union bureaucrats alike: supposedly we all have to tighten our belts, no-one's job is safe, we have to plug away until the economy picks up...

Yet some of those who seem to have most reason to 'keep their heads down' have rejected this. This is most clearly shown in the examples of the 6,000-strong migrant workers' strike in France, the national stoppage planned in Italy for 1st March and the fightback in the City of London.

These workers do this not by hoping their trade unions will negotiate them favourable terms, still less relying on the good faith of the likes of the Labour Party.

Rather, these struggles show the power of workers standing up for ourselves. With or without union support, in the face of multinational corporations, the state and the borders régime, each of these movements expresses workers' self-reliance and lack of deference to the powers-that-be.

This precisely how all workers can fight the ruling-class offensive: daring to take autonomous mass collective action.

national strike after racist offensive in italy

by Marina Falbo

Rosarno is a sleepy town situated in the southern Italian region of Calabria. But on 7th January it was catapulted to the centre of a media frenzy when hundreds of African migrant workers rampaged through the town, setting fire to rubbish bins and conducting a street battle with the police. The riot was sparked after a gratuitous attack against the 26 year old Ayiva Saibou. When the local police told the immigrants they could not help the injured man, within hours as many as 2,000 immigrants marched on Rosarno's town hall before being driven back by police.

The day after, protests continued. The protestors carried placards saying "We are not animals", calling attention to their desperate situation. They marched to the town hall where they demanded to see a government representative. The riots provoked an unseen backlash against the immigrants in a mix of xenophobia, mafia and economic

hardship. Local residents set up a barricade near a meeting place for the immigrants.

Media reports said that despite heavy police presence two immigrants were beaten with metal bars so ruthlessly, that one of the wounded had to be taken to hospital for brain surgery. Five other immigrants were deliberately run over by vehicles and two other immigrants were hit in the legs with shotgun pellets. In the wider unrest that followed, the official number of injured totalled 67, including 31 immigrants, 17 Italians and 19 policemen. About 700 were put in detention centres and bulldozers erased their shanties.

Immigrants in Rosarno

Before the riots, around 2,500 immigrant workers were living in and around Rosarno. Many have political asylum or are otherwise legally in Italy, but legal or not, the migrants are managed by a Mafia-run employment system, the *caporalato*, that oper-

ates like a 21st century chain gang. Immigrants were either living in abandoned factories or shanties made out of cardboard and wooden boards. For 1,000 workers living in an abandoned factory there were only 8 toilets and 3 showers, no electricity and until last year no running water. These workers' living conditions were described by Médecins Sans Frontières simply as "terrible". This is the result of a meagre income of around €25 for a 12 to 14 hour working day. According to *The Economist*, €5 of this goes to overseers suspected of links with the 'Ndrangheta, the Calabrian Mafia.

Economic hardship, quiet xenophobia and organised crime

The way immigrants are treated in Rosarno is not an exception but sadly an example of how, according to the CGIL trade union (the largest in Italy), about 50,000 immigrant workers around the country live.

continues on page 5 >>

pcs ballot 300,000 for strike action

by Steve Ryan

Wrexham PCS

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) civil service union has commenced a ballot of all 300,000-plus members for strike action. The ballot ends on 25th February.

It comes after talks on the government's proposals to cut the value of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme proved fruitless.

The cuts will reduce payouts under the scheme – already ungenerous due to the low pay of civil service workers – by two-thirds.

It is a clear attempt to make sacking workers cheap as Labour forges ahead with its plan to cut 100,000 civil servants... at a time when the whole service is collapsing. The cuts are having a major effect on the ability to deliver.



pcs members: in a grim mood, but preparing a fightback

In HM Revenue & Customs thousands face redundancy even though billions of pounds of tax remain uncollected.

The mood is grim as PCS members recall the sell-out on pay. Nevertheless it is paramount that the ballot is won with a resounding yes/yes vote: both in favour of industrial action short of striking, and in favour of an initial strike of 1 or 2 days followed by further dates if necessary.

This will enable PCS workers to fight back not just nationally but taking innovative action within their constituent groups against job losses and speed ups.

If successful the sight of a large group of workers fighting back should inspire others in both the public and private sector. Links between disputes should be developed and town committees established for mutual support and to control actions from below.

right to work conference

by Mark Harrison

30th January saw the 'Right to Work' conference in Manchester, organised by the Socialist Workers Party. Billed as "a conference of resistance and solidarity" it was heavily over-subscribed, and around 900 people crammed into Manchester Central Hall.

The first to address the conference was Ian Allinson, member of UNITE's First Executive Council and a senior rep for Fujitsu Manchester, which recently saw the first ever IT strike in Britain.

We were reminded that we are experiencing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, that there was worse to come, we would be made to pay for it and that resistance is essential. In a populist bout Ian finished by attacking 'the bosses and the bankers': in reality it is the barbaric system of capitalism that oppresses us *all* which is the problem and must be replaced by a society in which we all have control of our own lives.

Next to speak was Clara Osagiede, RMT cleaners' grade secretary who has previously been victimised for her organising work. She said that she was able to get London cleaners a living wage in 2007 with the help of the RMT. The comrade continued that the crisis is global and is widening the gap between rich and poor, with the worst-exposed workers predominantly migrants. Furthermore, now that the popular anger against bankers has passed it is the working class which is being blamed and made to pay. Clara attacked the slogan 'British Jobs For British Workers' and reminded us that "A defeat for one is a defeat for all".

Also speaking was Tony Kearns, CWU senior deputy general secretary: he from the same CWU leadership who voted unanimously to sell out their membership... there were enemies in our midst and they were given a platform!

Next I attended 'After BA... Defying the anti trade union laws'. I believed this would be an opportunity to hear militant workers talk of their experiences as well as method of struggle, instead of the totally generic 'jobs not bombs' type slogans and also hoped to hear the SWP's analysis of unions considering their positions in national leaderships.

The workshop was opened by Charlie Kimber, head of the SWP's industrial section, and Paul Brandon, a London bus worker in UNITE who recalled that in 2008 there was a co-ordinated legal effort by bus companies which prevented a London wide strike. Charlie assured us that this would be "not just be a talking shop", and commented that anti-union laws were now more repressive than they were under Thatcher and that more workers need to be prepared to defy them, as they did at Lindsey and Visteon.

The main speaker was Linda Bartle, a worker involved in the occupation at Enfield Visteon. Linda spoke of how she was intimidated by a UNITE official, who warned her that she could receive a criminal record for her actions. Despite paying dues to UNITE all her working life the union refused to help with the legal battle. Linda ended by saying that the occupation had been a life changing experience which had "opened her eyes" to groups such as the SWP.

Once the workshop was opened up to the floor most contributors complained that they had to spend as much time fighting their union as their bosses and I was interested to hear Charlie Kimber remark that it "does not matter how good a union leader is". Other contributions seemed to focus on rank-and-file type tactics. Despite Paul Brandon's willingness to form "a civil rights type movement" to pressure parliament to reverse trade unions laws, a contributor from the Anarchist Federation argued that workers should take control of struggles themselves and make strike meetings open to non-union members, mentioning the London Education Workers Network as an initiative to follow.

The final rally was entitled 'Building Solidarity - Uniting the Resistance', Although rather distracted by a black labrador at this point, my attention was briefly rekindled by Dave Chapple of the National Shop Stewards Network mentioning IWW leader Big Bill Haywood and proletarian democracy. Also of note was a speaker from the Justice For The Shrewsbury 24 campaign and Juan Carlos Piedra of Justice 4 Cleaners. Victimised for organising cleaners to fight for a living wage, explained that he was reinstated due to other workers' solidarity but received no help from UNISON or UNITE, despite being a member of both.

At the end of the rally a pre-prepared statement of intent was passed unanimously and it was announced that all 11 amendments had been accepted. We were allowed to vote for a steering committee of 25 although a list of successful candidates has not yet been released. Follow up meetings are scheduled across the country.

strike victory in north devon nhs

by Mark Harper

The strike conducted at North Devon District Hospital on 5th-6th January has resulted in a victory for the UNISON members there.

Amid plans for further strike action, the North Devon Healthcare NHS Trust and private contractor, Sodexo eventually gave in to our demands for NHS terms and conditions for the outsourced porters, cleaners and catering staff. This has resulted in 7 days extra annual leave, sick pay, NHS pay levels with increments, increased Maternity pay and back pay worth up to £3,600 for each member of staff. Though most staff will only move to band 1 of the pay structure which is still too low, the improvement is a significant step forward.

We celebrated on the town square that weekend at a rally that was attended by UNISON General Secretary, Dave Prentis and the regional secretaries of UNISON and the PCS. One of the highlights of the rally was listening to a senior consultant at the hospital describing how hospitals could be run without managers and advocating that the current lot should all be sacked to improve staff morale. At the end of the rally everyone sang the old wobbly song "Solidarity Forever". Hearing my fellow hospital workers sing a union song amongst union banners and clenched fists on Barnstaple Town square was a wonderful experience that I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

The actual victory came sooner than expected. Following the strike, management still in union busting mode, actually withdrew an earlier offer made prior to the strike. If this had been done to demoralise the workforce then they had grossly miscalculated the situation as it just made us more determined. Some union reps within the UNISON branch not employed by Sodexo also found themselves under scrutiny over their involvement in the strike. I was informed from two separate sources that the management of the Trust were "gunning for me".

Despite this, throughout these days the mood remained positive, although the general feeling was that we were in for a long and bitter period of strike action before a victory would be achieved. Things changed quite quickly during the week that followed the strike. The North Devon Healthcare NHS Trust had to make an embarrassing climb down after initially denying to the media that scab labour had been used. Of course we'll never know, but I expect several telephone calls may have been made to the Trust telling them to settle the dispute soon after this.

I've been asked several times what I think we did right and if there was anything the movement could learn from our victory at a time when victories are too few and often defensive in nature. Well, the answer is that we didn't do anything that hasn't been done thousands of times before. It was no overnight success either. My personal belief is that UNISON should have coordinated disputes and strike action at national level back in 2007 when the majority of NHS trusts decided to pocket the government money given to roll out NHS terms and conditions for outsourced "soft facility" staff. I believe that the union didn't do this because they didn't want



unison members in north devon won NHS terms for staff outsourced to contractor sodexo

to upset the Labour Government or the private contractors who at national level had agreed to the deal knowing that they wouldn't have to pay for it. At Branch Level we waited too long for a Regional Officer that was prepared to run with the issue. In hindsight we should have had more confidence in ourselves to just get on and begin the dispute. From the start there had been an air of militancy among the members. This had become tinged with demoralisation after the expected escalation from UNISON failed to occur in 2007.

I think it was the coming together of an already militant workforce and a dedicated regional officer that provided the right mix which gave the union the confidence to pour in the resources. Once the resources came it was very noticeable how much latent power there is in a union like UNISON. Though we were lucky to have a couple of very good officials, through out it was the membership that recruited and continually pushed the dispute forward. By the time of the strike the line between member and activist had all but disappeared.

What I've learnt from this dispute is that there is an enormous amount of potential militancy and energy out there in workplaces that is rarely tapped by the trade unions. That a union is at its strongest when the distinction between activist and member is at its most blurred. Also that the confidence of workers increases with leaps and bounds when they belong to an organisation that is willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with them. What I've witnessed from UNISON has restored my faith in the potential of my union but not its leadership. UNISON members in the same situation are still fighting to get this deal on a branch by branch basis when what is needed is national action. I think what holds back UNISON and in fact all trade unions is their bureaucratic nature and affiliation with reformist politics.

The only type of union that can be guaranteed to fight immediately and every time is one that is directly controlled by its membership so that the union truly is the membership and can draw confidence from itself. A union of this type can never be attached to any political party that intends to put the interests of capitalism above the interests of the workers.

british airways staff to vote again on strike

by Gregor Gall

Unite, and its cabin crew branch, BASSA, are currently locked in a truly titanic battle with BA. Unite is reballoting for strike action, with the result due on 22nd February.

The litany of what BA has engaged in to break the cabin crew's will to resist has got longer and longer. Since the New Year, this has included recruiting strike-breakers from existing employees, threatening to end benefits of strikers and encouraging the establishment of a yellow union, the Professional Cabin Crew Council.

BA workers are rightly asking why they should have to carry the can for the slide in the financial fortunes of the company. They have continued to work just as hard and conscientiously as before.

And, ironically, one of the reasons why the cabin crew is so up in arms about the company's cost-saving package is that having less staff on flights is reducing the quality of service and will mean fewer passengers booking with BA.

The answer to the BA workers' question is that there is no justification for the company's attempt to make them carry the can other than the company's will and might to make them do so.

In spite of its size and influence, BA's realisation of profit is largely dependent upon a number of things outside its control, including security alerts and economic growth in terms of passenger numbers, landing fees and cost of fuel.

So BA tries to use its labour costs – comprising workers' wages, benefits and so on – as the shock absorbers to deal with this.

To put it bluntly, BA takes what it cannot control and responds with what it can control. This is the way it tries to square the proverbial circle. Just about the only thing that stands in BA's way to do so is workers' collective will and organisation to resist.

The particular problem facing BA is that pretty much all its competitors were set up with non-unionised workers so their labour costs are much lower.

Indeed, under the act of parliament that created BA, it was required to recognise unions. This continued until BA was privatised, but by then the unions had established their power.

So BA is trying to force its workers to accept the logic of the 'race to the bottom': if others pay less, so must it. The task facing BA workers is not just to resist the company in the here and now but do what they can through Unite to further raise up the terms and conditions of their fellow workers in the other airlines.

The lesson is that the stronger must pull up the weaker and not let the weaker pull down the stronger.

Clearly then, a lot hinges on the outcome of the ballot and how a possible mandate for action is used to stop – or at least slow down – the race to the bottom.

the commune

what the tv doesn't tell us about haiti

by Claudio Testa
Socialismo o Barbarie

The world's TV is showing, as we might expect, a false picture of reality. In the case of Haiti, this is all the more outrageous given the circumstances. With barely disguised racism they paint the picture of a people who are suffering but "ignorant" and "barbarous", incapable of "keeping order" by themselves after the earthquake, necessitating a renewed colonial occupation, with a fresh US invasion.

Of course, no-one mentions the two-hundred-year reparations sentence capitalism and imperialism imposed on the Haitian people for having carried out the only successful slave revolution in history. Still less do they tell us about recent events, like the significant workers', students' and peasants' struggles against colonial occupation and Preval's puppet government which developed in 2009.

In the last decade the US government forced Haiti to create "free trade areas" where they set up the latest-generation factories, primarily producing textiles. These textile mills today employ almost 30,000 workers and, in spite of the world crisis, they do not appear to be dying down. The secret is paying the lowest salaries in the world (even less

than in China or in Latin American factories) and forcing an ever-more-infernal pace of work.

But capitalism, when doing this, has created what did not exist in Haitian society before: a new working class, young and "modern", amid a country with elements of barbarism and subject to a colonial-occupation political régime.

In 2009 this began to express itself in important workers' struggles. As well as this explosive mix was the important factor of the radicalised student movement, which supported workers' mobilisations and also demanded an end to the occupation. Some students were in conflict since April.

In May 2009 there began a working-class struggle with near-immediate political consequences, resulting on a direct assault on the government and the MINUSTAH (United Nations) troops, which lasted, with some gaps, until almost the end of the year. As they repressed these struggles the occupation troops, commanded by the forces of the "progressive" Brazilian president Lula, killed and wounded dozens of workers and students.

The struggle began with the demand for an increase in the minimum wage from 75 (\$1.80) to 200 (\$4.80) gourdes per day. At the same time as partial and all-out strikes, lasting

up to two weeks, thousands of workers held daily demonstrations in the streets of Port-au-Prince with the students.

By July this pressure had forced the Congress to concede an increase in the minimum wage, up to 200 gourdes. But the Preval "government" vetoed this increase in the textile industry, the largest sector, keeping it at 125 gourdes (\$3) per day. On 17th August the Congress accepted this veto.

Logically enough, all this politicised the struggle, resulting in a direct confrontation with the colonial occupation and its puppet government, lasting until August. Then MINUSTAH engaged in a brutal repression of the movement, banning demonstrations. Numerous working-class and student fighters were imprisoned. Many other activists "disappeared".

18th November saw commemorations of the battle of Vertières, where in 1803 the Haitians decisively defeated the French troops. That day the students went into the streets, provoking fresh clashes with police and MINUSTAH troops.

The situation in Haiti before the earthquake was not "social peace", nor resigned acceptance of colonial rule. Now, acting in its own self-defence, US imperialism wants to place more shackles on the Haitian population and its workers. We must not let them!

action on unemployment

by Brian Rylance

For those who experienced the deprivation caused by the recession of the 1980s, and were galvanized by the strength of the fight against it, there can be a feeling of hopelessness at today's relative lack of organisation and militancy to defend the position of the working classes as many are pushed into unemployment again.

Yes, it must be admitted that the fightback has been slow in gathering strength, but there now appear to be three main strands of resistance appearing. At a national level there are campaigns to protect benefits rights and protest against erosion of 'safety net' welfare state legislation. This is linked with an attempt to revive the unemployed workers' centres that have shut. At a grassroots level there are attempts to create action groups with a more combative approach – some of these have been remarkably successful.

One clear message from reports of the SWP's recent Right to Work conference was that the use of private corporations, like A4E, to 'deliver' Job Centre programmes adds to the victimisation of claimants. This policy has introduced a target/commission based element to drive people into possibly unsuitable jobs, at great expense to public funds, and yet the success rates of these companies at finding people work remains notably low – this is hardly surprising, since the much-needed jobs are constantly being cut! Along with battling against new 'welfare reform' (in fact, wel-

fare *abolition*) legislation, resisting this policy of privatisation is central to the national protest campaign.

Defending and expanding unemployed workers' centres clearly has its roots in the 1980s even though in some form or other they date back to the 1920s. In defending and expanding the unemployed workers centres, the question of how they should be funded is a key concern. Unions, councils and political parties/factions are all possible funders of such centres but each have interests that potentially clash with each other as well as with the interests of claimants.

The work done by these centres is invaluable, giving people benefits advice and helping with appeals. Those like the Salford Unemployed and Community Resource Centre are clearly of great importance, but it is also clear that their independence must be assured if they are to genuinely act for the people that they have been set up to defend.

The grassroots strain is heralded by those like the Hackney Unemployed Workers Group whose approach is based on a mix of support, advice and, certainly in Hackney, a direct action approach. Advice and support are essential to sort problems with as little stress to claimants as possible. This is difficult territory, with the CPAG (Child Poverty Action Group) book providing the legal information: training is needed to use it correctly. Even then advice must be checked as the livelihood of individuals and families is at stake. Groups like Hackney are an inspiration to new organisations springing up all around the country – for exam-

ple, I am involved with a set of activists in Oxford who plan to form a new Unemployed Workers and Claimant's Union, and we hope to learn from their valuable experiences.

When the system fails to respect a claimant's rights then direct action has been used successfully in Hackney to reverse decisions. Links with the Public and Commercial Services Union have been made in some cases to try and reassure the workers in the Job Centres that they are not being personally targeted and that it is just the decisions that are being fought, though when the case involves bullying of claimants by individual staff this relationship can become more difficult to negotiate.

Because the DWP use call centres in regions distant from the areas effected, decisions in the South of England may be made in Glasgow or Belfast, but picketing and leafleting the local Job Centre has still been reported to have had positive results. One legal framework for unemployed unions is the 'friendly society', reported not to be subject to the same restrictive anti-union legislation affecting actions such as flying pickets, though this needs investigating further.

Ultimately this is a front – the fight to defend the rights of workers and claimants – that can provide a real way for the left to act to protect those most at risk in recession. Taking left politics out of the lecture hall and meeting room is essential if we are to genuinely try and fulfill our aims and also undermine the fascists who falsely claim to offer solutions to problems faced by the working class.

two stars of british nationalism

by David Broder

"British workers target Gordon Brown", screamed the *Daily Star* on 19th January. One year after Unite leader Derek Simpson posed with two *Daily Star* 'glamour models' with 'British jobs for British workers' placards, the rag promised that on 3rd February thousands of angry construction workers would "march on London claiming Gordon Brown has failed to honour his "British jobs for British workers" pledge"

Meanwhile when the 3rd February *Morning Star* reported the previous day's demo over the Kraft-Cadbury deal, they almost seemed more concerned about standing up for the "historic British chocolate manufacturer" than the livelihoods of the workers themselves.

However, at the construction workers' demo itself, all was not quite as we might have been led to believe. The 100-strong protest in Westminster was organised by the GMB union after an audit proving that at the Staythorpe site in Nottinghamshire, migrant workers were being paid only 500 euros a month: 1300 euros a month below the industry rate.

GMB placards demanded equal pay for all, and attacked undercutting which meant the subcontractor Somi preferred to use foreign labour rather than local unemployed workers, since it could do so more cheaply and undermine the industry agreement. Speakers at the closing rally repeatedly and clearly expressed solidarity with the Portuguese, Italian, Polish and Greek workers who were being underpaid, and demanded that they be paid the industry rate.

This was marred by the repeated invocation of the idea that such workers were unskilled and not 'proper tradesmen', reflecting skilled-ism and sectionalism, if not British chauvinism as such. Indeed while GMB leader Paul Kenny referred to the dialogue the union had established with migrant workers at power station sites, they did not appear to be involved in the demonstration.

However, whereas the *Daily Star* had quoted an Amicus/Unite shop steward to the effect that "All we want for Brit workers is a fair crack of the whip to have first preference on jobs", and at the Cadbury demo Unite's Jack Dromey had commented that "Our fear is that the Kraft takeover is not in the national interest", most speakers at the Old Palace Yard rally steered well clear of such sentiments. A *Daily Star* photographer who attempted to hand out 'British jobs for British workers' posters was rebuffed.

Phil Whitehurst, GMB National Organiser for Engineering Construction Workers, specifically attacked British chauvinism, and Jerry Hicks – who is contesting the election for Unite general secretary – also gave a powerful speech. Hicks expressed concern at the lack of progress made in levelling up industry rates since the oil refinery wildcat strikes of January 2009, although a strike is mooted for Staythorpe in late February.

A local shop steward emphasised that this action would be 'official', but Whitehurst and Hicks both hinted at the need for solidarity from other sites. Some nonetheless seemed impatient at the union's recent tactics – when one worker asked what the GMB was up to, Whitehurst said that the

GMB was doing all it could to lobby the government, to which came the reply "Mandelson – wanker". Quite.

Indeed, the New Labour MP John Mann injected particular venom into proceedings. Mann "had no problem" with 'British jobs for British workers' and claimed there is plenty of land in his constituency to build more power stations.

With an eye on the upcoming General Election, Mann announced that he would be tabling a motion in Parliament to the effect that all major construction projects are carried out by British workers: if anyone had a problem with that, he assured us, he had the "100% backing of all 79,000 men women and children" in his constituency. A pity: I'm still hoping the more internationalist-minded children of Bassetlaw will be spoiling their ballots.

While what Mann had said was at odds with the general themes of the rally, he received enthusiastic applause, more than anyone except Hicks' militant call for struggle. It seemed his defiant nationalism also appealed to a lack of progress made by the GMB and Unite over the last year.

The Staythorpe strike, and any solidarity action that follows, will hopefully continue the demonstration's turn away from the kind of slogans which appeared during last year's oil refinery walkouts. However, clearly there will have to be much more involvement of migrant workers, rather than them just being the subject of sympathy. As with fighting recessionary cuts, we must not defend only some industries or groups of workers, but more broadly resist management's right to control us as they please.

solidarity with workers in haiti!

★An appeal by the Haitian class struggle trade union Batay Ouvriye

For us, the Haitian people, the earthquake in Port au Prince, on 12th January 2010 hurt deeply. In fact, apart from the destruction of the public buildings most of our neighbourhoods were destroyed.

Not surprisingly they are the most fragile and the most unstable: the state never gave them any service, any attention or helped them consolidate. On the contrary, we need to be able to move, so we have neither time nor capacity to be able to consolidate our position from being precarious.

Meanwhile some capitalists are trying to force the workers back to work in damaged factories, owners of large businesses are opposed to distributing their goods and sell them at a high price, the state proves again, as always, by its absence, its incapacity and incompetence (the only thing they do is steal and manoeuvre, supporting the landlords, the bourgeois and the multinationals), the national police are absent (they only know how to repress the people) and the imperialist forces are clearly taking advantage of the aid they give.

They intend to establish a clear and definitive control over factory workers, workers of all kinds and the suffering masses in general, who are extremely dependent, with this disastrous situation.

Some of the press develops a progressive part of their work as their representatives help coordinate on the ground, several people's committees are working consistently and relentlessly, giving all their energy for rescue and survival. But! They lack the means and capacity of intervention! Truly, this earthquake, besides having thoroughly physically and morally shaken the population, far exceeds the abilities of people to intervene.

In Batay Ouvriye, even though the majority of our organizers are living, many have lost family, homes and their meager possessions. Many are injured and, while we have to bury our dead, survival is almost impossible.

To the extent that it is possible, we refuse to go through official government channels. But the situation becomes impossible to sustain! So today, we launch an appeal for solidarity to all factory workers, all workers, all progressive people worldwide to help us out of this disastrous situation.



in a desperate state: military occupation has expanded after the devastating earthquake

After the last major mobilization around the minimum wage, we developed several new contacts brave and consistent worker comrades. They live in different neighbourhoods, sometimes far apart. We also need to reach them with our active solidarity. This substantially increases costs.

Moreover, in areas where our members live, there have been some common solidarity actions amongst in the communities. We need to get more involved in them and to take energetically the necessary measures.

And, as soon as possible (that means being able to concretely and practically intervene) take new initiatives (where possible) to build resistance to forms of reconstruction proposed by the dominant classes. This will also require money. When considering these types of actions and solidarity, we can say that what we need now is a sum of \$300,000

That is what will allow us to survive for now, help other fighters and conscientious workers to try to solve some specific life problems and build a political leadership in the class struggle that is organizing in the rubble.

This latter aspect should be developed where possible from the start towards gaining a maximum possible force against another type of catastrophe that awaits us: what the imperialists and the ruling classes and their reactionary state are preparing for us.

We thank in advance all those who intend to contribute. The moment calls for international class solidarity. It takes a character of an additional approach, a further step in our common struggle.

★Contribute funds to Batay Ouvriye via 'No Sweat', account number: 20106269, sort code: 08-60-01 (add reference: "Batay Ouvriye")

haiti, western intervention and the left

by Rob Kirby

Tony Blair's appearance before the Chilcot Inquiry brought up once again his hoary old argument that as Iraq is better off without Saddam, the invasion of British troops was a progressive thing for Iraqis.

Whilst Blair's stance is clearly a self-serving attempt at justification for the barbarism that was unleashed on Iraq, the broader argument that Western troops can sometimes be a force for good does have currency for some on the left.

These tensions emerged recently on the issue of Haiti, as The Commune was criticised for articles on our website calling for "troops out" and accused of kneejerk anti-imperialism. It is worth examining the origins of these arguments, and restating the basic objections to the invasion and occupations of other countries by our own.

To give our critics their due, there has been a reflexive and ill-thought through aspect to some thinking on the left on this issue in recent years; they are right that each situation does need to be taken on its specificities – but they are entirely wrong on the specifics of this case and on the general principles underlying the attitude that communists have towards foreign intervention, which this article will seek to address.

Soldiers aren't aid workers

The first and most superficial point to make is that soldiers and aid-workers aren't the same thing. Whilst the role of NGOs is to tend to and help the victims of the earthquake, the role of the military forces sent to Haiti is generally recognised to be to "maintain order" over the people living there, to protect property rather than people, and to ensure the continuity of a widely discredited and authoritarian government.

To allow western governments to elide this distinction is to uncritically accept their narcissistic self-image as a "force for good" in the world, and to buy into the propaganda of

"humanitarian" militarism that they successfully used to prosecute a succession of wars from the Balkans to Somalia in the 1990s.

Foreign intervention is undemocratic

In an independent country, the state requires the active or passive support of a substantial proportion of the population to be able to function effectively. The state, whether democratic or not, does have to have some kind of basis in the society it governs, even if that is with a section of the population we might have no sympathy with, such as the bourgeoisie or landlords.

A country under occupation, however, can be governed by appeal to the political desires and physical force of the occupying powers, essentially removing the state from any necessity to appeal its own population. A case in point is the recent rigged elections in Afghanistan; Hamid Karzai's belated decision to undergo another round of voting had more to do with the desires of his external backers than any militancy on the Afghan street. The Afghans were entirely disenfranchised, in every way, reliant on external arbiters to keep their government in check. The sham "democracy" there, even if looked upon charitably, is still a gift of the west; freedom and democracy imposed from outside cannot be sustained by the societies on which they are imposed, and are perverted mockeries of the real thing.

Democracy is a relation between states before it can be a relation within them. The Chinese or Iranian working class, whilst living under harshly authoritarian regimes, can at least fight within their countries to further their positions.

Those under military occupation such as the Palestinians have no control over their own fate; that is why national self-determination is so jealously and violently guarded by people around the world, and progressive struggle in subject nations generally takes the form of national liberation movements. To second guess and condemn the attempts of people to liberate themselves from foreign domination would be

laughable if it were not so reactionary: support for national self-determination requires no ifs or buts if it is to be consistent.

The state is not progressive

One of the critics of The Commune's stance commented on the group's "trajectory" from support for workers' self-management to "idiot anti-imperialism". In a certain sense this critic is correct – consistent opposition to imperialism is a natural development of The Commune's anti-statist politics. The remainder of the British left's fixation with and loyalty to state socialism means they are predisposed to see progressive potential in the actions of the state – even, occasionally, when they are military in nature.

Probably the clearest example of this blind spot was during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Groups perfectly willing to support any national liberation movement, no matter how brutal or bizarre, in faraway places in the third world, balked at providing consistent support to people struggling within their own borders.

When so much of the Labour-influenced left saw socialism as coming through state action, and supported the welfare state as truly progressive rather than just palliative, the existence of an armed organisation fighting against "their" state provoked the same kind of reactions seen amongst those socialists who supported war in 1914.

Resisting imperialism

In resisting imperialism, the labour movement does two things. Firstly, it provides consistent solidarity to workers and others abroad; aiming to make it impossible for our government to subjugate those peoples. Secondly, and equally importantly, it is about us here; by resisting the imperialist aspirations of our government, we develop the ideological independence from the state necessary to fight for our own class. Buying into the "white man's burden" myths of Haitian savagery and western nobility do nothing to further either aim.

cleaners fight back at city bank

★Involved in cleaners' struggles in the face of the anti-migrant repression of the UK state and the opposition of the Unite union bureaucracy, Alberto Durango was recently victimised by contractor Lancaster working for Swiss bank UBS. *The Commune* went to press shortly ahead of a mass protest in the City of London defending migrant workers' right to organise.

by Alberto Durango

As a representative of UBS workers I am very satisfied with the many activists' and union organisations' response to the call for solidarity, against the injustice committed by UBS and Lancaster: a fine example of working-class solidarity.

When I started working at UBS I found much discontent among the workers. In the last year their working conditions had been mercilessly attacked. This assault began after the success of the 'living wage' campaign in 2008, the bank and the cleaning contractor Mitie reducing the number of staff and moving full-timers onto part time timetables.

The excuses for this first attack were the crisis, and, supposedly, saving energy. Then they started to take break-time out of the workers' pay, and, as if it was some small concern, they told the workers that Mitie had lost the contract and the incoming employer (Lancaster) would cut a further hour.

This was the spark which lit the fuse of the workers, who could not put up with this any longer. Workers joined the union and elected me their representative. Without delay we wrote to Lancaster protesting the change in working conditions, making clear enough that we would not accept it.

The company allowed us a meeting, which I attended with all those affected by the change. The Lancaster representative was the same person who in May 2009 had turned me in to the police and the UK Borders Agency as punishment for the Schrodgers workers' victory of October 2008. The meeting began with much arrogance and intimidation



migrant cleaners working at city banks are on the sharp end of the recession

on the part of the Lancaster representative, who told us that we had to accept the changes or lose our jobs. The workers' response was very proud and emphatic: we would not give in.

Lancaster officially became the contractor on 1st February, and on the 2nd they suspended me, no longer able to work for Lancaster given past conflicts with them. They called me to a disciplinary hearing on the 4th, where I was sacked.

This type of attack happens every day in different contracts with different companies, people sacked because they will not accept worsening conditions. Most such attacks pass unnoticed, allowing the companies to violate workers' rights with impunity. For Lancaster and UBS I am just another person in the way of their plans to make more profits: so they want to crush me like a cockroach.

This struggle, which has only just begun, must be symbolic and an inspiration to other workers in the same situation. The living wage must be made real, and wealthy companies must be forced to respect workers' conditions. I invite all workers to build a common front to stand up for our dignity: all workers must unite to resist the attacks unleashed by our class enemies.

resistance to racism in italy

>>continued from page 1

Most migrants live in poor conditions similar to those in Rosarno and paid miserable salaries. In a sense, Rosarno is emblematic of the net of economic hardship, quiet xenophobia and links to organised crime in which immigrants, whether undocumented or legal, too often are trapped.

A local representative of the CGIL trade union pointed that the way farming is financed is playing a crucial role in the town's social breakdown. On December 11th the Italian farmers' confederation said that the local citrus industry had been made "unsustainable" by a flood of cheap Spanish oranges and Brazilian orange juice. Imported concentrate could be bought for €1.27 a kilo—53 cents less than production cost in Italy. Furthermore, orange farmers were no longer paid EU subsidies for the amount of fruit they produced but instead according to the amount of land they farm. This means less incentive to produce fruit. The Rosarno riots were thus partly caused by the failure of southern Italy's economy to cope with the change in the European Union and globalisation. The use of an artificially (indeed, illegally) cheap labour force sought to guarantee steady profits. However, now it represents a burden and unaffordable commodity.

Rosarno is also a fortress of the local organised-crime group, the *'Ndrangheta*. Well known for its international drug and gun-smuggling network, earning tens of billions of euros, it is also said to manage the illegal labour force that picks crops. Rumours say that mobsters knew that black immigrants were not needed anymore and their 'expulsion' would be tacitly accepted. The immigrants' uprising led to the immediate expulsion of those involved. Investigators are also looking into possible relation between the unrest and a bomb attack four days earlier against the offices of the attorney general in Reggio Calabria, 60km from Rosarno. Police arrested more than 40 suspected Mafiosi, including 17 who could be affiliates of the clan from Rosarno.

Moreover, the riots took place amid a general climate of racial hatred and intolerance. Racism and xenophobia toward migrants, as well as members of the Roma and Sinti ethnic groups, is a serious problem in Italy. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has said that his government rejects the

idea of a multiethnic Italy. A 2009 law made undocumented entry and stay in Italy a criminal offence punishable by a fine of up to 10,000 euros, while a 2008 law made an undocumented stay in Italy an aggravating circumstance in the commission of a crime. Political discourse, policies, and legislation over the past two years have reinforced a perception of a link between migrants and crime, feeding a climate of intolerance.

Indeed, the interior minister, Roberto Maroni of the xenophobic Lega Nord party, claimed the tensions were a result of too much tolerance towards clandestine immigration, thus trying to place the blame on the African workers.

Primo Marzo Strike

As a result of the Rosarno riots, a non-violent collective Primo Marzo 2010, *Una giornata senza di noi* ('1st March 2010, a day without us'), bringing together people of all colours, religions, genders, and sexual and political orientations, has called a migrants' strike for 1st March. On that day, migrants across Italy will stop working to highlight their contribution to the Italian economy, said by some analysts to be 10% of the national GDP. On the same day, migrants in France will strike as well. The struggle for humane living and working conditions, to live in dignity and against every form of discrimination of skin colour, origin, race, religion or gender, is a focal point of the Primo Marzo movement. It is a call for resistance to racial hatred and violent attacks against migrant workers with an organised protest of both Italians and immigrants.

This protest action is also emblematic of the ongoing crisis of the left; the organisers of the strike state quite strongly that the strike must not be related to any political structure, organisation or ideology and they chose the colour yellow as a symbol of the strike precisely because it has no political connotations. Whereas it could be a day where the class struggle and fight against racial hatred are united, where immigrants and like minded Italians fight together for fair and just working conditions, the traditional parties of the left will neither lead the struggle nor be welcome in it. The Rosarno riots help pinpoint the shortcomings of Italian society: its quiet xenophobia, economic hardship, organised crime and inefficient political class. But could Rosarno become also a wake up call for the left?

no let-up in french strike

by Antoine Boulangé

6,000 undocumented migrant workers, on strike since 12th October 2009, are bravely continuing their unprecedented struggle against the government in spite of very difficult circumstances.

Their determination is exemplary, faced with a government on the assault – propagating racism and Islamophobia – and a right-wing adding to their list of racist and 'pro-security' provocations such as the law against the burqa, the denial of asylum rights to 123 Kurds arrested in Corsica, and racist statements by the ministers for immigration and families.

The government is even more intransigent than in the 2008 dispute. At that time, with a movement a tenth the size, almost 3,000 workers' immigration status was regularised. Today the situation is more difficult. The 24th November parliamentary bill excluded most striking workers, given its very restrictive criteria. The minister suggests perhaps 500 or 1,000 regularisations, although there are 6,000 undocumented workers on strike and a total of 400,000 working in France.

Striking undocumented workers continue to reject a case-by-case solution. Today they are fighting for the regularisation of all 6,000 strikers, together, via legal promises of employment given by each enterprise and collectively deposited with the ministry of work, not via each individual police prefecture.

The government is betting on the movement wearing out. Union representatives continue waiting for a meeting with the minister of work. In spite of their courage, the strikers are suffering weariness and exhaustion. Judicial repression and police harassment have seen the eviction of the largest pickets at employment agencies and chambers of commerce.

After almost four months of strike action, finances have become decisive. The pickets need money, coal (given the cold) and food. Workers have been forced to find other work to survive. The strike is supported by the CGT, Solidaires and CNT trade unions, various political associations – such as the RESF (Education Without Borders Network) and the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme – and dozens of committees. The movement has to consider the way forward: so far, although many have signed their support, organisational support has remained limited and local.

The CGT union leadership's strategy has always sought to limit the struggle to the issue of work, even though it is clear that the undocumented workers' strike is in full-frontal opposition to the government's policies on national identity. This limitation has prevented the widening of the movement. The CGT has only sought to mobilise its members on this question at a token level.

While many undocumented workers are employed by sub-contractors of large firms like Bouygues or Veolia, there has not been any attempt to mobilise the 'legal' employees of these enterprises. These too, however, are workers subject to the race to the bottom typified by the fierce exploitation of undocumented workers. The appeal for financial help has been little-advertised, only collecting 30,000 euros nationally – five euros per striking worker. Only three and a half months into the movement did the CGT organise solidarity committees in the Paris region.

However, there is a way forward. In spite of almost blanket media silence, the government has not managed to win the battle of public opinion, as recent polls have shown.

At KFC in Les Halles there has been a joint strike of undocumented and French workers, seeking regularisation, higher wages and better conditions for all. But this is just one embryonic example.

More than ever, we need a wide anti-racist movement of French and immigrant workers, trade unions associations and left parties. This is what the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste has tried to promote, launching an appeal for left parties to give active solidarity to the strike: however this has not materialised as real mobilisation, since these other parties separate their electoral campaigns from social struggles.

But all is not lost: quite the contrary. Even if the situation of the striking workers is difficult, with the risk of the strike crumbling workplace-by-workplace, this struggle in itself represents a success in the battle for public opinion. We must continue the struggle for the regularisation of all striking workers, which would mean defeat for the government.

communism for the

★On January 16th Edinburgh played host to the 'Global Commune' day school, hosted by Scotland's Republican Communist Network and supported by The Commune.

Although we are faced with the greatest crisis of capitalism for decades, the majority of socialists today are not prepared to make the case for a viable alternative social order to get us beyond the ever-deepening capitalist crisis.

The objective of the day school was to develop communist thinking on what kind of society we want to create and how that relates to our activism and our slogans in the context of today.

Workshops at the event included discussions on 'What real communism would look like', 'How communists organise and operate' and 'The legacy of official and dissident communism—or what communism isn't'.

The day featured lively and comradely debate and we hope to stage another joint event in Edinburgh shortly.

Here we present reports on the contributions made by the speakers in the opening session of the 'Global Commune' event.

where have all the marxists gone?

Mary MacGregor

Republican Communist Network

Mary welcomed everybody to The Global Commune event. She explained that the RCN enjoyed sharp debate, but many of us have come from organisations where insult is an art form. The RCN does not believe this is the way to greater truth or understanding, insisting that debate should be conducted in a comradely fashion. We can still learn from others even when we disagree.

The RCN has been in existence for ten years. Our members come from different traditions and have united around the slogans – Republicanism, Revolutionary Democracy and Culture, Workers' Power, International Socialist Revolution and World Communism. We form a platform, acting as a republican communist pole of attraction in the Scottish Socialist Party. The SSP does not see itself as a *revolutionary* party, so we have faced a sometimes difficult struggle

Nevertheless, the RCN has had its successes. In particular, we are seen as the champions of democracy within the party. We have also pushed the leadership into an openly republican stance.

The RCN has also challenged nationalism, seeing the struggle for an independent Scottish republic as part of the break-up of the Union and the struggle against imperialism. We have pushed for united struggles on the basis of 'internationalism from below'.

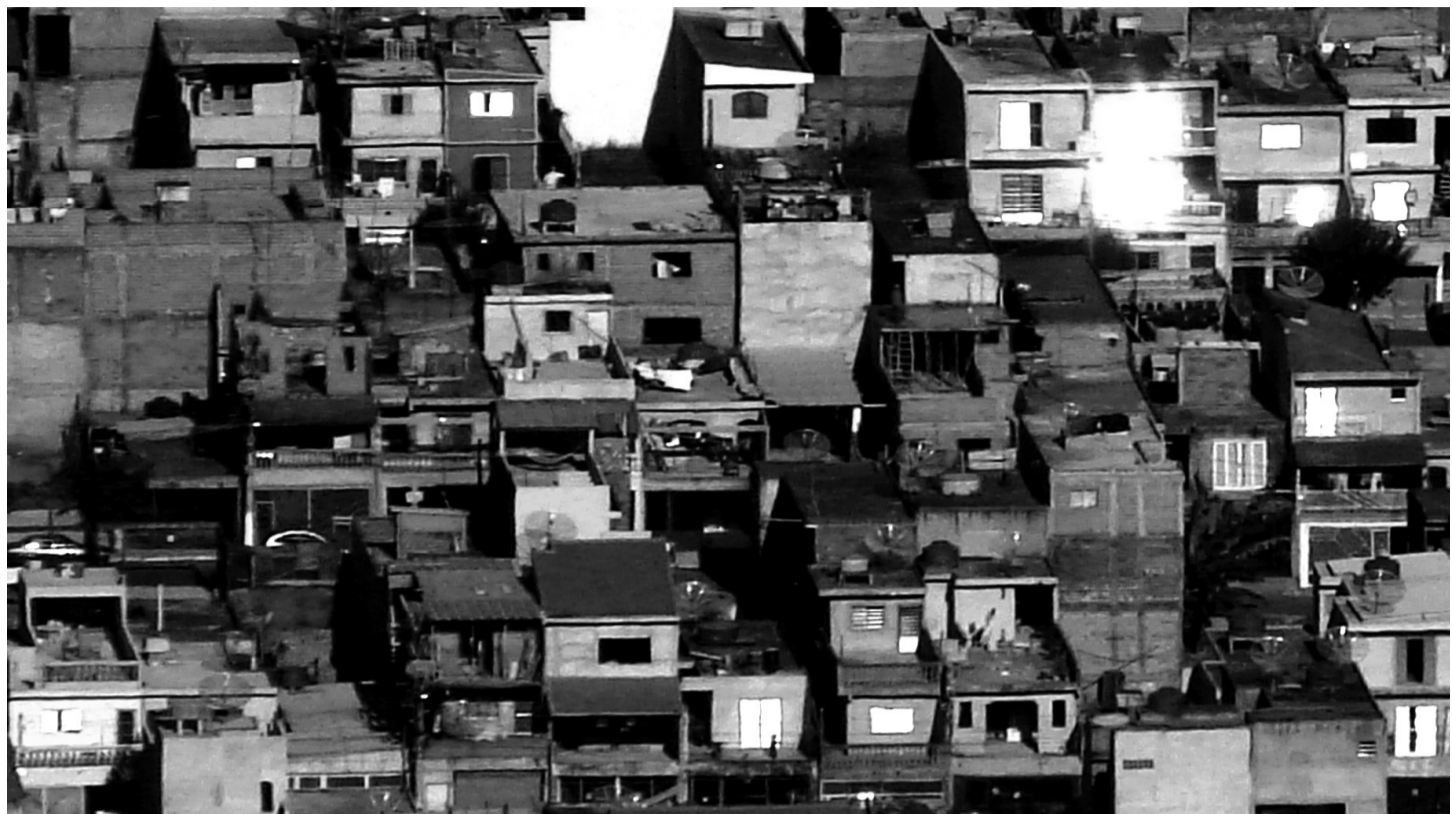
Mary had been listening to a radio programme, which asked, "Where have all the Marxists gone?" Somebody replied saying they were still here celebrating the fact that Marx was right and that capitalism was in freefall.

However, we know that this is not an adequate response. We face a terrible economic crisis, where many of the working class are being thrown on the scrapheap, where we face new unimaginable horrors, with never-ending imperialist wars, environmental disaster, whilst many of the world's poorest live on less than a \$1 a day. We are being brought to the brink of barbarism.

In the UK we face the rise of fascist organizations. The left is fragmented. Many believe this is as good as it gets. There has been a rise of religious extremism, superstition and mysticism, all offering their own 'safe havens'.

Yet there are still those of us who remain convinced that there is a communist solution to the crisis. Nevertheless, many think us as deluded in our beliefs as any religious sect, and see our beliefs as an gesture of faith.

This is why we must deepen our understanding, and convey our thinking in ways that don't alienate; organise in a truly democratic way and offer a vision of the future which can inspire.



"the left won't raise the issue of alienation: this is seen as abstract marxism, yet, out in the real world, in the favelas, the pentacostalists are recruiting massively by addressing such issues"

neither utopia nor settling for less

Allan Armstrong

Republican Communist Network

The thing that has brought the RCN and The Commune together is the left's response to the so-called 'credit crunch', or what is really a deep-seated crisis of capitalism. Many on the left had celebrated what they saw as the end of capitalism, believing that as the capitalist class was being forced to adopt neo-Keynesian measures to deal with the crisis, this represented a step towards socialism.

This view comes from the widespread belief on the left which equates state control with socialism, in particular seeing nationalised property relations as something inherently progressive. Indeed the difference between orthodox communism and social democracy is often seen to be a difference in the degree of state control of the economy.

However, when the banks were nationalised, it wasn't to advance some progressive agenda, but to save the system from itself. The banks were bailed out at our expense and before long bankers were once more receiving obscene bonuses. When Obama went on to nationalise Chrysler, this was followed by a programme of massive redundancies and attacks on pay and conditions.

Because much of the left confined themselves to demanding the existing state nationalise even more private companies, the capitalist class began to regain confidence. Their current neo-Keynesian measures may represent little more than a blip on the road back to neo-liberalism. The key issue isn't whether something is controlled by the state, but which class controls the state.

Last June, Allan was writing an article for *Emancipation & Liberation*. He found The Commune was addressing the same problems on the left as the RCN. We published the relevant articles in each other's journals.

One issue that Allan thought needed looking at again, was the left's, particularly the Trotskyist left's, belief that the current situation could be addressed using 'transitional demands'. In effect, this meant trying to relate to workers' trade union and social democratic consciousness, expressed in support for such things as better wages, a public health service and free education. Instead of making an 'abstract' call for socialism, workers striving for 'transitional demands' will come to see the need for socialism through their experience.

The problem with this approach is that it hasn't worked. When a crisis occurs, governments, especially social democratic ones, say that they sympathise with workers' de-

mands, but they just can't be afforded at present. Thus, our desires have to be shelved until the system can afford them. Therefore, workers need to be convinced of the possibility of a real alternative, if they are to sustain struggles to defend their interests in an economic crisis.

We have seen this problem in the SSP, where demands such as 'free school meals' and 'free prescriptions' have been called 'transitional'. These though have been taken up and watered down by the Scottish National Party, and have provided no transition at all. The thing that could possibly be considered transitional about the necessary struggle for reforms, is if they enhance independent workers' organisations.

So what are the issues that communists should raise? We need once more to address the fundamentals. Opposition to wage slavery is a key issue. Wage slavery is the essence of workers' existence under capitalism. In the past there were major struggles against chattel slavery. Yet some on the left would dismiss the notion of opposition to wage slavery as ultra-left – something that 'would not be understood' by workers.

Indeed, those from the Militant (Trotskyists on the left of the 1980s Labour Party) tradition, for example, often raised the story of a communist organisation visiting a picket line of workers striking for higher wages, with a leaflet calling for the abolition of wages. 'How ridiculous is that?' Yet most workers and indeed many others, including those on the right, do appreciate that life under wage slavery is crap. That is why they try to escape 'field slave' status by becoming managers, or capitalism's 'house slaves', or to set up their own small businesses.

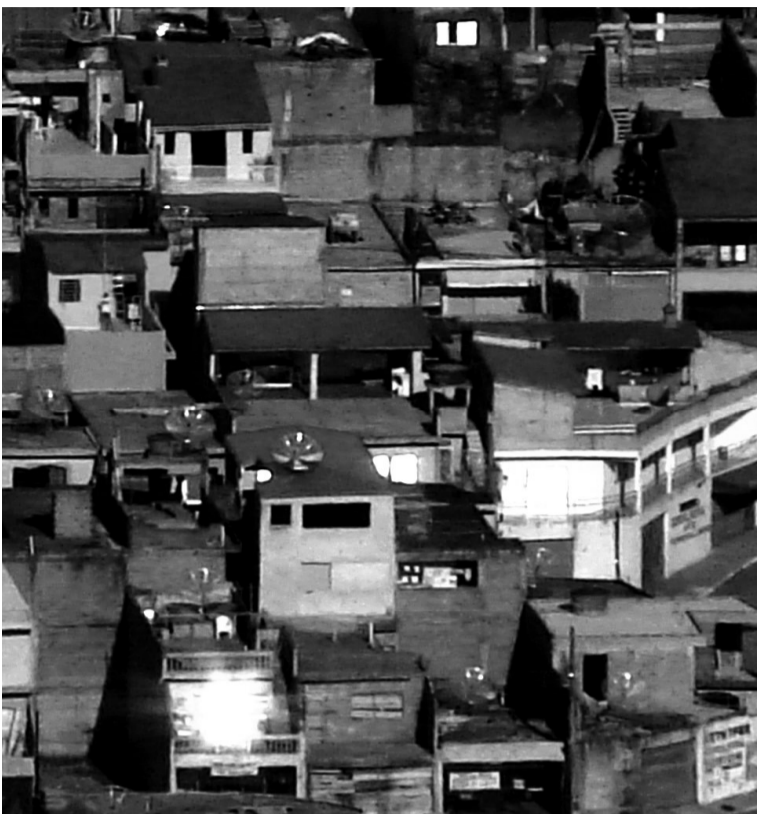
Another issue which the left won't raise is the issue of alienation. This is seen as abstract Marxism. Yet, out in the real world, in the favelas and shanty towns, religious groups like the Pentacostalists are recruiting massively, by addressing such issues, albeit in their own dead-end ways. Issues like alienation should not be left to the forces of organised religion.

All this would probably be dismissed as 'Utopia' by most of the left today. You have to look to art to see these issues addressed. Art can be seen as releasing the world of the imagination, and expressing our deep-seated desire for freedom.

We don't want to construct an abstract Utopian programme, but connect the struggle for communism with the real struggles on the ground. One of the attractive features of The Commune is its active engagement with issues such as migrant worker rights. This is a key issue. Genuine communists have always related to the struggles of the most oppressed.

This leads to the question of organisation. Allan had been a trade union activist brought up in the rank and file tradition. This means not only opposing trade union leaders locked in

e 21st century



slums and shanty towns, religious groups like the penta-

social partnerships but also the Broad Left approach of 'capturing' union leaderships. A rank and file approach means acceptance of elected trade union officers, but only if recallable and on the average workers' wage, with all actions under the democratic control of the workers involved.

However, Allan recognized there is another approach advocated by the IWW and in Ireland (where social partnerships have been in place longer than the UK) by the Independent Workers' Union. Space for new independent unions has also been created by the widespread de-unionisation and the emergence of new non-unionised jobs. Communists need to get involved in the debate between the best approaches to be adopted, in particular circumstances, showing tactical flexibility as needed.

Lastly there is the question of communist political organisation. The Commune seems to have stumbled on what is necessary – a return to the pioneering Communist Correspondence groups of the early 1840s. The RCN has contributed to *The Commune*, with its wide ranging debates and contributions from elsewhere in the world. The RCN very much welcomes The Commune's proposal for a new *International Communism* magazine.

In the longer term, Allan thought we should be trying to move towards a Communist League, with a definite platform. This platform could only come about through widespread prior discussion and debate, which he hoped would be facilitated by our present stage of organisation. Any Communist League, like the original in 1845, should be both international and open to a wide variety of tendencies.

self-government, self-management

Chris Ford

The Commune

Chris thanked the RCN for organising the day's event and for inviting comrades from The Commune to contribute.

Chris wanted to reiterate the comments made by Mary about the need for a real culture of debate. In today's society with such alienating social relations, it was not acceptable that the left treated each other like dirt.

This is why The Commune makes frequent reference to communist pluralism and unity in diversity. These phrases may trip easily off the tongue and be harder to bring about in reality.

However, they are an absolute necessity. If we are to transcend capital, we must organise in a manner that is complementary to the type of society we wish to create.

We need to reestablish a culture of divergences, platforms and factions. It is not about conquering each other, but using the various contributions to take philosophy, theories and clarity to new levels, if we are to bring about working class emancipation in that spirit.

It is twenty years since the so-called 'Fall of Communism'. Fukuyama has called this the 'End of History'. We were told there was 'no alternative' to capitalism or to liberal bourgeois society. These predictions have not been fulfilled. There has been no new golden age of bourgeois liberal democracy.

The problem we have to face today with our meagre resources is the tragedy that whilst whole swathes of the populace agree that capitalism is an unviable society, with continued exploitation, oppression and alienation, there is little confidence, even on the left, that there is a viable alternative.

Let's look at another 'end of history'. Engels said that Hegel marked the 'end of philosophy'. Hegel was unique in that he considered philosophy as a whole. At each turning point in history, certain philosophers had come forward representing the search for truth, as representatives of their historic moment. As Raya Dunayevskaya, the Marxist Humanist, said each generation of Marxists, in their own right, had a duty to restate Marxism for their own time and place. That is the responsibility we face in our time.

The ideas of Engels and a number of other post-Marx Marxists have left us a problematic legacy. A considerable number in their view of historical development and theory adopted an approach that there were scientifically proven truths which could be revealed, and laws that were themselves unfolding and bringing about the new society, which would evolve from capitalism almost by process of spontaneous combustion.

In this vision the role of actual human beings involved as the decisive, creative subjective force was degraded. There was little conception of a new society based on new social relations.

Most problematic was the position in which they placed the state over and above society, as the vehicle for creating a new society. This has been the legacy of official and dissident communism. That legacy remains very much with us today.

It says a lot about the left, that during the 'credit crunch', 20 years after the collapse of that totalitarian society calling itself communism, and the most apparent bankruptcy of state ownership model of socialism, that some still argue that we could begin to create a new society by nationalising this or that part of capitalism, in the belief that this formed part of the 'invading socialist society'.

As it turned out, Brown answered their call, with state intervention in the banking sector. Indeed a recent Editorial in *The Times* claimed that the banks now represented the last bastion of workers' control! Therefore, we have had not only much the nationalisation of capitalist bankruptcy but the bankruptcy of the traditional left.

In the face of all this, it is vital that we restate the vision of communism that has been eroded and destroyed for such a long period of time. The most important point is that communism is created by human beings themselves. It is the radical rejection and total uprooting of the social relationships of capitalist society. It is a process of de-alienation in which workers' self-management a key. It is the creation of new social relationships and new forms of economic life.

It is not a society that is based on one party, or even two or three party rule. It is directly organised by workers themselves. Indeed, communism is not a society run by a state at all. It is one of communal self-government, the organising of the social life on the basis of the self-management of the producers of the goods and services.

That is the vision of the Paris Commune, which has been so abandoned by the traditional left. No doubt we will be called anarchists. That is what Lenin was called when he wanted to change the Bolsheviks' official name from Social-Democrat to Communist. That was before he himself regressed. But the stateless vision of the Paris Commune was Marx's communist vision.

If we don't return to this vision, we will just end up recreating the unfinished revolutions of the twentieth century and get stuck in the same cul-de-sac. That is the danger we face if we don't have a vision of total emancipation.

the commune's meetings around britain

★London: The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital. We are running a series of reading groups on workplace organising this spring as well as 'uncaptive minds' forums on the themes of the general election.

The next meeting is a discussion on rising unemployment, looking at the effects of the recession and the underlying causes of joblessness under capitalism. From 7pm on Monday 1st March at the Artillery Arms, 102 Bunhill Row, near Old Street.

Join our email announcements list at <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommune-london>, or phone David on 07595 245494 for more info

★Bristol: we are running a reading group series on "Alternatives to capitalism". The second such meeting, on "Communism, anarchism and the Paris Commune", will be held from 6pm on Sunday 28th February at Cafe Kino, Ninetree Hill, Bristol. See the advert on our website for suggested reading.

★South Yorkshire-based activists interested in The Commune should get in touch with Barry on 07543 652629

The second communist discussion group in Sheffield is on the subject "The rise of the far right and anti-fascism". From 7pm on Tuesday 16th February at The Rutland Arms, 86 Brown Street, Sheffield S1 2BS. See the advert on our website for suggested reading.

★North-West: the Manchester Class Struggle Forum is scheduling meetings for next month. Contact Mark on 07976 386737 or see the Facebook group at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=472351030412>

★West Midlands: If you are interested in a meeting on local organising or our group call Dave on 02476 450027

★Wrexham: we are planning a series of meetings around the title "Storming the heavens - alternatives to capitalism". Paper sales will also be launched in and around the town centre

★The Commune's Facebook page is at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=100975860952>

★La Comuna: noticias para inmigrantes y trabajadores hispanohablantes en el Reino Unido. Ver www.lacomuna.co.uk

thecommune.co.uk
uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

what is a city? cycles, structures, strategy

★As *The Commune* went to press we were preparing the first of our Communist Theory Forums in London, held on 14th February. The articles over this double-page, as well as a piece by Vijak Haddadi published online, serve as the background reading for the meeting.

by Sean Bonney

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess, among other things consciousness, and therefore think."

In this famous extract from *The German Ideology*, Marx suggests that while alienation begins in basic social and economic relationships, it sustains itself by immediately expanding into intellectual life and thus is able to determine the entirety of social reality. Just as it is necessary for capitalism to expand outward into ever more territories, by violence or seduction, thus it must expand inward into the consciousness of those it subjugates. In what follows, I want to use the ideas of Henri Lefebvre to show that, while alienation is *produced* at the level of economic exploitation, it is *expressed* at the level of social reality itself. Specifically, the city becomes an engine of bourgeois ideas that is able to produce those ideas within its inhabitants as if they were their own, and as if they were the only ideas possible.

Henri Lefebvre's contribution to Marxism was his extensive analysis of everyday alienation, and he is best known for his multi-volume study *The Critique of Everyday Life*. As a young man working on the fringes of the Surrealists (who themselves had a highly serious though somewhat troubled relationship with communism), he was responsible for the first circulation of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts. After resigning from the French Communist Party in the late 1950s, he became arguably the most important intellectual influence on the ideas of the Situationist International.

I am going to concentrate on one small section of Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*, which was written in the immediate aftermath of the Parisian 'events' of May 1968, and in which the city is analysed in terms of three structural levels which work together to produce capitalist reality. For reasons of space, I am also going to simplify Lefebvre's ideas quite gratuitously. Lefebvre argues that the city is comprised of "a *global* level... *amixed* level... and a *private* level, the level of habitation".

The global level, which expresses "the most general, and thus the most abstract relationships" is the dominant. It is the level of international capital itself, of corporate and imperialist power, and although it exists to enforce capitalist reality as its basic and central level – economic and social relations – it expresses itself through the large-scale trappings of the city itself: monuments, tourist attractions, spectacular development projects etc.

Thus, it projects itself temporally to give the idea that current economic conditions have always existed, and always will. To place these ideas within the contemporary scene, such disparate entities as the Tower of London and the Olympic developments in the East End are brought together as expressions of capitalism as a natural and inevitable force. Massive changes within the everyday workings of capital, plus imperialist ventures into new areas are thus normalised and made to seem unquestionable.

The other two levels are the places where we actually live. In a simple sense, they can be seen as aspects of each other: they are where we actually live. Thus, the private level is our own basic lives, our homes and everyday comings and goings, while the mixed level is where we meet and exist socially. It is manifested in our streets, local shops and markets, in public parks and in buildings such as libraries, pubs, cafes.

That is, it is where actual social life is conducted. But the mixed level is also, Lefebvre argues, an *intermediate* level, where the dominant ideas of global capital are able to enter our everyday lives. Lefebvre thus posits a topdown model of social reality, where the abstractions of global capital are able to occupy all levels of social space.



the dystopian film metropolis portrayed the totalisation of capital's control of the city

To give a very crude example, in Walthamstow Town Square a massive TV screen has recently been erected, so that an area where previously people would associate in a more or less unmediated fashion is now dominated by spectacular manifestations of capitalist ideology. On a more general level, those cafes I just mentioned are increasingly being transformed into global corporate environments such as Starbucks and so on. Strategically then, our problem, as Lefebvre puts it, is how to turn this model upside down, so that the social and collective desires expressed on the private and mixed levels can become dominant and thus, by extenuation, dissolve capitalist social relations and enable true social life: that is, communism.

To make a grotesque understatement, that's rather more easily said than done. I don't think anyone would disagree that the period in which Lefebvre formulated this analysis was a time that contained, even given the defeats of 1968, rather more scope for optimism than our own. This was long before the near fatal setbacks of the Thatcher era, not to mention the disorientation that followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Lefebvre's mixed level is now occupied by global capital in ways that would simply have seemed impossible in 1968. The public buildings have either been privatised or decimated, and furthermore, the global has almost completely dissolved the private level, which is constantly being pushed further out onto the perimeters of social space. Crucially, these changes are immediately *normalised* by the illusory eternal being of capitalism.

Lefebvre described the city as a 'social text', and the model I have very simply sketched was one of his attempts to read that text. However, capitalism is not a stable ideology. The processes whereby the global level is able to increasingly occupy the levels where actual life is lived, in what is essentially an internalised imperialism, necessitates an unfixing and constantly fluctuating expression of its being. If Lefebvre's metaphor of the city as a text is feasible, then it is one that does its best to make itself all but unreadable. Although, as we have seen, global capital presents itself as an unchanging and inevitable system extending backwards and forwards through time, it can only do this through a system of cyclical transformations.

A particularly contentious example would be Soho. In the late nineteenth century it was an area in which European communists could find refuge. Marx, of course, lived there (on a site that's now an overpriced restaurant) as did those who were trying to escape the repression that followed the defeat of the Paris Commune. The area was full of communist meeting halls, lively bars and cafes and, perhaps most crucially, extremely cheap rents. By the mid-twentieth century it was the haunt of a curiously right-wing British bohemia that still lived on the frisson of a relaxation of social mores left over from its previous occupants. Today, those lively bars and cafes are allegedly still there, but now they

are used by media workers and tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of a few celebrities.

The level of global capital thus moves in an endlessly constricting circle, where its enemies are gradually transformed into the agents of its transmission. On a more basically economic level, its cycles also move outwards. Working class areas such as Shoreditch or Spitalfields are gentrified first by an influx of artists and other bohemians looking for cheap rent, which in turn makes such areas attractive for highly paid city workers until, ultimately, ever increasing circles of the city become little more than a monument to global capital.

Recently, with the Olympic development in Stratford, it seems that even the intermediate, and at least nominally left-wing, element of bohemia is no longer necessary. Meanwhile, the working class are made invisible. Worse, with capital's weapons of unemployment and the threat of homelessness, the class becomes increasingly criminalised, thus expanding the ultimate level in Lefebvre's schema, albeit one that he left out: the prison.

Strategically speaking, we have to admit that the situation looks dire. However, Lefebvre's analysis may help us to read and interpret the city, thus enabling us to think of ways to take back social space in actions that can complement the central struggles taking place in the workplace (ironically, another level that the basically bohemian Lefebvre leaves out of his schema).

So far, Lefebvre's critique of the occupation of everyday life by global capital, when not being depoliticised in academia, has been the province of lifestyle anarchism. Squatted social centres, for example, are an attempt to reclaim social spaces from the reaches of capital, but all too often they are disastrously unable to make a connection with their communities. When the old Vortex jazz bar in Stoke Newington was squatted a couple of years ago, it very rapidly deteriorated into a hang-out for countercultural activists whose concerns were perceived as very remote from those of the working class in the area. The highly politicised Turkish community for example, preferred to hold their meetings in the yuppie bar round the corner.

But Lefebvre's analysis still does have potential as a weapon in the class struggle, in that it can help us in our attempts to theorise and understand capital's domestic strategies of domination. If we can theorise social space as an expression of the false totality of capitalism, and begin to understand the relationship between the private and the global levels dialectically, then perhaps we will be able to begin to move from the defensive position that we have been in for too long. Lefebvre's critique of the city may enable us to see our various struggles, in the workplace and out of it, as being absolutely connected. And then, perhaps, for the first time in a generation we will be able to go on the attack.

beyond the party-state, beyond the big bang

by Nathan Coombs

Wherever we look in the history of communist politics we see states which in one form or another have become dictatorships; the economic and political structures reduced to stifling bureaucracies. Can this be explained merely by recourse to contingent factors: the fact that revolution did not break out in Europe in the 1920s, imperialism against the socialist states during the Cold War, and so on?

The tempting answer for communists is to focus on these facts, lump the blame at the feet of Stalinism, or the leaderships of the Communist parties. This way guilt is apportioned and we can rest secure that the fundamental idea is fine; it is just the flawed implementation at the source of the problems, or the external pressures at work. Such an approach can be surmised by the optimistic refrain: 'never mind, things will work out fine next time!'

Of course, the fact communists have to come to grips with is that *there will not be a next time as long as such a sentiment prevails* – the wisdom of crowds has already adjudicated on communism as a failed social model: 'nice idea, but doesn't work in practice' being the gratingly predictable notion one encounters. The easy riposte to such sentiment would be a combination of judgment on the ignorance of people nowadays, their shallow materialism and ideological indoctrination into capitalism. The people thereby become the enemy, unable to realise the truth communists speak and forever held in suspicion and contempt. This latter option swiftly rejected, there seem to be two things to take into account here: (1) whether the degradation of all communist states into dictatorships is really just an assemblage of contingent causes; and (2) whether most peoples' belief that there is logic to this failure is just a result of propaganda and under-education? And we could also add a third (3) factor: even if both (1) and (2) were ruled contingent, *whether it strategically makes any sense to contradict the mass of opinion in this regard?*

It is my opinion here that there is an immanent necessity as to why most people consider the communist model as flawed; and this cannot be reduced simply to the dispersed cultural indoctrination into the thought of such anti-communists as Frederic Hayek (*The Road to Serfdom*) and Leszek Kolakowski (*Main Currents of Marxism*). There are I believe flaws in the 'idea of communism' which not only led to the collapse of really existing socialism around the world, but also to its very undesirability as an alternative social model. These are numerous and multifaceted, but what I want to focus on here is the procedural dimension of how power is taken and used.

But before I start my critique of existing stratagems I first want to immediately make clear my even greater dissatisfaction with the prevailing neo-anarchist thought that has become fashionable since the end of the Cold War. That is, if we take John Holloway's *How to Change the World Without Taking Power* as emblematic, there is a caution at work here that Slavoj Žižek rightly mocks as a fear of 'going too far.' For the insurgent ideological movement state power (or even power *per se*) must be kept at a distance, and as such radical politics is forced into a kind of tacit relationship with the status quo, where protesters demand things from those in power, but do not seek to attain and wield power themselves. There is much the same logic at work in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, where the Frankenstein's monster of the multitude (the many against the few) challenges the Empire, but not to seek to bring it down; because, in a profound sense, the Empire already is utopia realised. What all this points to is I believe the fact that 'radical' philosophies, which actively spurn power, all hide a dirty secret, which is the ultimate satisfaction which the status quo – that is, with the liberal, capitalist state.

In this regard I think we should be proud to be 'dogmatic' traditionalists. I really don't see any evidence that the analysis presented by Rosa Luxemburg in *Reform or Revolution* is less true today than it was in her day. Yes – the mechanics of class struggle are infinitely weakened in their polarized, dialectical form than they were in the early 20th century; and yes – the historical consciousness of the defeat of the global revolutionary movement of the 20th century and the economic and political failures of really existing socialism, alter the strategic calculation. But the state-form as the expression of the interests of the ruling class and capital no less requires toppling now than it ever did – at least, in any form of communist politics worthy of that name. There is an immanent necessity which follows from a politics which aims to abolish wage labour that the state has to be smashed, or profoundly refigured for this to be accomplished.

That said, we are still left with what appears to be the cripplingly predictable outcome of Marxist revolutions which



we cannot just repeat the tactics of russia in 1917

managed to take state power. They certainly represented an advance over events such as the short-lived Paris Commune, in that they not only managed to take power, but to also defend the revolutionary gains. This is an incredible achievement, not to be underestimated. But at the same time, these gains were achieved at the price of bolstering the state, rather than presiding over its withering away. A process of radical reductionism in all cases seemed to collapse the economic and political functions within the post-revolutionary state solely to the party-state. The gains of revolutions – once the initial shine of victory receded into the past – began to be measured solely by material indicators: education, health, housing, job security etc. And whilst one should not be too hasty to deride these achievements, it is obvious that they fall far short of the kind of social and political emancipation that Marx had in mind for communism. It could also be somewhat maliciously observed that these accomplishments ultimately only mirrored, in a radicalised form, the functions of the welfare state in social democracy.

The question, then, is what process could lead to a revolution in which this process of reduction to the party-state is not an inevitable outcome? Anarchist lullabies to one side – that all we need to do is take up a voluntaristic, negative position vis-à-vis the state – what needs to be grappled with is the question of immanence: isolating those tendencies within the existing system that create the possibility for capitalism's transcendence. This was Marx's major breakthrough compared to all of his contemporaries.

The overall 'line' of *The Commune* – *the ends of revolution need to follow from the means* – I think correctly diagnoses the problems of communist strategy in immanent terms. How can we talk of mass political emancipation when the model of communist power involves some small, centralised vanguard who 'know what's right' taking on the levers of the formerly bourgeois state and attempting to institute communism from above? For communism to be immanent, and thus have the required complexity, openness and organicity for emancipation, it needs to be based on real, immanent tendencies within the existing system.

And it is here that I think even *The Commune's* thinking has not so far gone far enough. For in the notion of revolution we still cling to a big-bang type event, in which the immanent possibilities are suddenly released to become real. Now, whilst not wishing to deny the emancipatory possibilities of these great, historical events, the question it seems is more one of scale. And furthermore, it could also be one of strategy. No revolution in the model of the big-bang event has ever happened in a Western liberal-democracy. Whether we think of Russia, 1917, or even Iran, 1979, the big-bang event is restricted to those situations in which a dictatorship is being toppled, which for the historicist could lead to the depressing conclusion that one needs dictators to make revolutions, or more perversely that one needs to assist the forces away from liberal-democracy to authoritarianism to speed up the revolution – 'things need to get worse before they get better!' It seems that both theoretically and strategically too much has been invested in the big-bang event of the revolution. That is not to repudiate the necessity of the revolution, but rather I would argue requires a change in thinking of it less as a big-bang and more as a 'tipping point' in which the pressures and immanent trends within the system can no longer be contained within the existing state structure. Just as rolling a heavy barrel up a hill takes an enormous amount of energy, we should think

of the revolution more as the moment when it passes over the brow and rolls of its own accord and with rapid velocity down the other side.

What this implies is more than the means need to match the ends, moreover it means for me that the seeds of communist relations need to be planted within the system *before* the revolution. The difficulties of this are numerous and well documented: individual worker co-operatives become prey to the same logic of the market as their capitalist counterparts; the political structures subsume, or make impossible, attempts at real democratic autonomy from the bourgeois state.

Nevertheless, some form of instituting these relations in the *present* needs to be introduced into communist thinking, which is perhaps something that can be taken from anarchist thought, but radicalised with the rigorous realism of communist thinking about the capitalist system. But at the same time I would also caution against the retro-utopianism of certain green thinkers that believe, for instance, that collective food self-sufficiency on a local level can institute these relations. Firstly, because, continuing with our loyalty to pursuing immanent possibilities, this kind of hair-shirted collectivism has nothing to do with the modern, technological aspirations of the majority of the population in the developed states, who are very happy with their iPhones and ready-made meals for £1 (roughly 20% minimum wage hourly salary – a clear benefit of automation). And second, the aspiration of the majority seems to be for more individualist autonomy, no matter how illusory under capitalism, rather than localised collectivity. On the latter point, it is not enough merely to point to the illusions of these ideals and the propagation under capitalism. No – they should be fully recognised as the authentic, immanent imaginary; and communist thought should press in the direction of making this imaginary properly real. So what is needed is quite difficult. Taking the collective, non-waged labour of such projects as Wikipedia from the internet and transplanting them somehow into the real world – where people need to pay rent, buy their groceries, and take summer holidays somewhere warm – is not easy to imagine, but I think it must play a vital part in stimulating immanent trends in the existing system in the direction of communism. Workplace organising and trade unionism play an important role in this, but I do not think they alone are enough.

Where this approach really cashes out, however, is in the question of state power. The problem with the approach of the means needing to match the ends is that it imposes almost impossibly high standards for the democratic nature of the revolution and the way state power is utilised in the early years of the revolution. There is the danger of being committed to a stubborn ideal, which in the chaotic, contingencies of the real world can never be lived up to. Perhaps a small vanguard really is necessary at some point to take political power from the bourgeoisie? Who knows. The important point is that if the immanent trends in the system have led to a revolution as a tipping point, rather than as a big bang, then no matter how that power is taken and wielded it still has to contend with the real immanent transformations in the system that have made it possible.

What I am proposing is that we need to have a theory of how to take power from both below and above; and it is in the coordination (or disarticulation) of these activities that a communist revolution could be achieved with an immanent possibility not to lead to inexorable reductionism to the party-state. Obviously much more work needs to be done to turn this initial sketch into a fully-fledged theory.

thou shalt vote labour: an 11th commandment?

by Clifford Biddulph

An eleventh commandment for many on the left is to vote for New Labour as a lesser evil, without illusions. But why? "The Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, which although made up of workers, is led by reactionaries, and the worst kind of reactionaries at that, who act in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie which exists to systematically dupe the workers". These words seem an obvious description of New Labour.

New Labour is the self proclaimed party of business, neoliberalism, the free market, privatisation, public sector cuts, and partnerships with employers. A party that has kept the legal shackles on trade unions as a matter of conviction. New Labour is also the party of aggressive imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Brown and before him Tony Blair were the ideological sons of Thatcher. Peter Mandelson, like Blair, is a close friend of the rich while the party presides over increasing inequality. An indication of the pro-business activities of New Labour is the recent complaint by ASLEF that the Labour government and the Secretary of State have compensated, through the rail franchise, the financial losses of train companies who have provoked industrial action by treating their workers badly.

However, the words describing the Labour Party are the words of Lenin in 1920, years before the first Labour government in 1924. He had in mind Arthur Henderson who was a Liberal agent for seven years, Phillip Snowden, a man of respectable conformist views, who went on to become the financially orthodox chancellor, Ramsey MacDonald who liked to dine with the wealthy and created a secret electoral pact with the Liberals. New Labour is very much a return to Old Labour's Liberal roots. Labour stood for class co-operation, not class war.

But at the second congress of the Communist International in 1920 Lenin compromised his analysis of Labour as bourgeois by recommending tactics which have remained a dogma for much of the left ever since, despite profound historical change. These tactics of critical support for Labour at elections were partly influenced by the delegate from the British Socialist Party. The BSP later became a key component of the Communist Party. The BSP were Labour members and had a left-reformist perspective of capturing the party for socialism. Even Willie Gallagher who later became a leading Stalinist, described them as reform-



some on the left have a religious devotion to voting labour

ists. Lenin claimed this was an exaggeration, although he did disagree with the BSP view that Labour was the political expression of trade unionists and the working class.

According to Lenin the only way to get a hearing for communist ideas from Labour supporters was to vote with them for their reactionary leaders. Lenin did not advocate voting Labour on the basis of political demands such as "Labour to power with a socialist programme" or "make the Labour Party fight for the workers". The communists would be able to obtain a hearing for soviets and workers' power by showing respect for the loyalty of Labour voters to their leaders and go through the disillusioning experience of parliamentary socialism with them. Jack Tanner, speaking from his own rank and file experience retorted that workers are always accessible in the workshops, the unions, and the streets. Communist agitation would find workers.

In the Soviet Union Lenin had already turned his back on the self-activity of the masses and focused on loyalty to leaders, hence the stress on Labour's leaders. Pankhurst raised the obvious objection that Labour voters would not trust such convoluted tactics. It was better to be open, direct and honest as an independent communist organisation. Besides, any disappointment with Labour leaders could simply end in political disillusionment with communism and socialism or lead to a swing to the right, or more to the point, trap communists in a project of transforming Labour.

Lenin did advocate affiliation to the Labour Party. But he discussed Labour in terms of it not being a fully fledged centralised national party, as if it was still a federation of affiliated socialist societies and trade unions without an individual membership. This optimistic impression seems to have been given by the BSP Delegate to the Congress.

Lenin also overestimated the revolutionary potential of the situation in 1920, as John McLean wrote in his open letter to Lenin. Parliamentary politics were not as unstable as Lenin assumed. Lenin also assumed the advanced workers had been or could easily be won over to communism with the help of the Russian leadership so the task was now winning over the less advanced workers who voted Labour.

His label of 'bourgeois workers' party' for Labour also muddied the water. A considerable number of workers are members and supporters of the Tory and Liberal parties. Because sociologically a party is working class does not make it fundamentally different from other bourgeois parties. The label implies Labour is not a bourgeois party and some kind of support is possible. The trade union link is not an organic link with the masses, but a bureaucratic indirect link. Contact with the working class has never been dependent on contact with the Labour Party.

Some of Lenin's disciples have followed his emphasis on loyalty to leaders and assumed mass struggle would pass through the Labour Party or be led by Labour leaders. History has shown otherwise. The great workers' unrest 1910-14, the general strike of 1926, the unemployed marches of the 1930s, the do-it-yourself reformism from below in the 1960s-70s, the anti-Vietnam war protests, the mass picketing of the great miners' strike in 1984-85, the poll tax riots, the modern anti-war movement and dock strikes and fire-fighters' strikes have all taken place without the approval of the top Labour leaders.

We should remember that the Labour Party was not a product of mass struggle nor even a social democratic party in the European sense, but a party which emerged from the bowels of the TUC and the trade union bureaucracy. There is no living connection with the mass of trade unionists in the workplace, much like the relationship between 19th century British trade union leaders and the Liberals, or union leaders and the Democrats in the USA. As Chris Ford has written in *The Commune*, "we do not have to settle for lesser evil capitalist alternatives".

the continuing assault on the unions

by Bill Butlin

As the general election approaches both the Labour and Conservative parties aren't saying much about what they plan to do to trade unions. Why is this?

The silence reflects a pro business consensus in the two main parties, that 'disorderly' and 'illegitimate' collective action by workers is a pathology that harms business, employees and the consumer. And was it not that son of Thatcher Tony Blair himself who boasted loudly that 'The Labour Party is the party of modern business and industry in Britain'?

Even within the context of Tony Blair's boast that the United Kingdom's has the 'most restrictive' trade union laws in 'the western world', the Conservatives aim to impose further restrictions on their ability to effectively represent their members. Nor does any attempt to abolish or ameliorate the debilitating effects of the existing anti-union legislation form part of the Labour Party's agenda for government.

But the Labour Party have not always been enmeshed in a neoliberal straitjacket. There was a time in the past, before it became prone to free market ideological infiltration, when it advocated and legislated for reforms that actually benefited the trade union movement. Let's take the 1974-1979 Labour government as an example of this. On its election the government of Harold Wilson immediately abolished the 1971 Industrial Relations Act which was the anti-union legislation of its day.

In a legislative package designed to encourage collective bargaining it created ACAS that then had the objective of encouraging collective bargaining; the closed shop was given greater legal protection meaning an additional 1.5 million workers were subject to closed shop arrangements; a statutory recognition scheme was introduced; rights to obtain information for collective bargaining purposes were given to unions; health and safety representatives were given legal status and rights; and in legislation that Jack Jones described as a "shop stewards' charter" shop stewards were given rights to paid time off to undertake their duties and training, and legal protection from victimisation.



gate gourmet: just one recent dispute in which anti-union laws were used to attack workers

Partly as a result of this state sponsorship union membership rose by 1.7 million between 1974 and 1979.

Key to understanding the current position of the unions is the recognition that the Tory government's legal attacks between 1979 and 1997 have been left in place by New Labour. Fundamental to these laws was an ever increasing restriction of the trade unions' immunity from civil action when taking industrial action. As a consequence trade unions now have to meet a long list of conditions if they are to be immune from legal action by employers.

This was decisive in the recent British Airways dispute, paving the way for the use of injunctions by any employer intending to prevent strike action. An injunction can order any industrial action to cease or be deferred. This serves as a device to impose a compulsory cooling off period. As was shown during the miners' strike if a union ignores an injunction they can face crippling financial sanctions or the sequestration of their entire assets.

This is not the only legal device that inhibits collective action that has been retained by New Labour. Laws outlawing the closed shop, laws preventing secondary action, laws that made the disciplining of members who refused to take strike action unlawful, laws that effectively prohibit unofficial and unconstitutional action remain in place. This has created a state of affairs in which a shift in the balance of power in industrial relations has given the employer the upper hand.

The retention of laws by New Labour that have the strategic objective of shackling the unions, has been combined with a legislative program that had the intention of establishing a minimum platform of individual as opposed to collective rights. One can speculate that in the context of a worsening crisis of British capitalism, pressure to introduce further curbs on the unions' meagre right to strike will intensify.

That's why leading Conservatives are advocating the removal of all civil immunities from unions taking industrial action, restrictions on the right to strike in key industries or services and the requirement to achieve an absolute majority of those employed in an enterprise before a union can take lawful industrial action. The last of these proposals would make initiating any form of lawful industrial action extremely difficult.

The Conservatives are also talking about breaking up national pay bargaining in the public sector with Michael Fallon MP arguing against paying "firemen the same in Doncaster as in Dorking, or a council planner the same in Merthyr as in Maidenhead". The always class-conscious Conservatives recognise that achieving this could well see battles in the years ahead and that the ensuing "confrontations could be as significant as those that faced Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s".

Should we be surprised therefore that the plans being made by the Tories to take on the unions in the public sector are being ignored by the TUC who are assuming the posture and stance of the Ostrich? The 'reasonable', partnership orientated Brendan Barber told BBC1 Politics Show 'I've talked with David Cameron a couple of times, we've had fairly business like conversations' adding 'I'd expect a new government to want to work sensibly with the trade union movement, that's certainly what I want to see'.

Barber may well want to see industrial peace in our times but the Tories have other plans. These are to build on the legal anti union foundations of the Thatcher years. Foundations that successive Labour governments have left in place during the last thirteen years and foundations that have undermined the trade union movements ability to mobilise their members for autonomous collective action.

what 'went wrong' with the winter of discontent?

★Often portrayed as responsible for bringing down a Labour government and 'letting in' Thatcher's Tories, the 1978-79 'Winter of Discontent' remains a high point in the history of the class struggle in Britain.

by Sheila Cohen

NUJ Book Branch

The Winter of Discontent (WoD) has not had a good press - either from the right or, less predictably, from the left. The most recent diatribe against this historic wave of struggle comes in a relatively recent publication whose author claims that "The Winter of Discontent marked the democratisation of greed...It was like the spirit of the Blitz in reverse". A former Labour minister's comment on the WoD that "it was as though every separate group in the country had no feeling and no sense of community, but was simply out to get for itself what it could" is used to illustrate "the callous spirit which characterise[d] the disputes".

This moralistic tone is sustained even by the openly revolutionary Paul Foot, who describes the strikes as "bloody-minded expressions of revenge and self-interest...". The sense of snuffy distaste for what is seen as unacceptably "economistic" activity is reproduced in the argument by another left-wing writer, John Kelly, that "the strike wave [was] an example of an almost purely economistic and defensive militancy". Poor old WoD; it just doesn't come up to scratch.

So what could be the explanation of the Winter's lasting fame, its sustained role as a symbol of everything that the ruling class loves to hate? Readers may remember photos of the notorious piles of rubbish used in Tory election posters of the 1990s; even today, the WoD is routinely invoked to raise a spectre of industrial struggle that must, of course, never again be seen. 1978-9 must have done *something* to rile the ruling class.

The Winter of Discontent was the longest and most comprehensive strike wave since 1926, with nearly 30 million working days lost embracing more than 4,500 industrial disputes. However, as suggested above, its analysis has always been riddled by mystifications and misconceptions. One such, very common, is that the WoD was a public sector strike - an assumption bolstered by the various urban near-myths of the dead being left unburied, rubbish piling up in the streets, etc. While these are not untrue, they are exaggerated - and in any case ignore the class basis for such supposedly "selfish" acts.

The focus on public sector workers also ignores the fact that this was originally a *private* sector strike wave. As such, the focus on action by relatively low-paid public sector workers draws attention away from the roots of the strike wave in the determination of the 1974-79 Labour government to restore "economic stability" on the backs of the whole working class through years of (initially) union-backed pay restraint. As shown below, it was this, and not the need to curb "trade union power", which let in Thatcher.

By late 1978, British workers had already endured over four years of both voluntary and statutory incomes policy. Working-class incomes, which had risen in real terms during the late 1960s and early '70s, began to see the beginning of the end of this improvement; statistics show that average earnings have never, despite ups and downs, returned to their peak levels in 1973.

What began the decline? The British labour movement's devotion to corporatist approaches to combating the evils of capitalism, expressed in this case through the "Social Contract" introduced as part of Labour's early 1974 election package. While the Contract, immediately and accurately rechristened the "Social Con-Trick", contained impressive reforms such as price curbs, pension increases and pro-trade union legislation (yes, that kind does exist) this was on offer from the first only in return for what was at first widely promoted as "voluntary" pay restraint.

It was hardly in accord with the times. Labour had come to office "in the wake of a tremendous wave of militant action...": the new government could now "contain militancy only by running before it". In part at least, the action expressed understandable outrage at the fact that Labour had inexplicably retained Heath's "Phase Three" wage freeze, resentment over which triggered a wave of strikes by nurses, BBC staff, GE factory workers and many more.

It was not until that supreme architect of left social-democracy, Jack Jones, blessed the Social Contract with the sacrament of the flat-rate £6 limit, prompting a chorus of praise for "equality of sacrifice" from the likes of Tony Benn and Barbara Castle, that the gut-level militancy of the early Social Contract years turned into some semblance of acceptance. Trade unionists bit the bullet, accepted their £6 increase across the board, and gave class struggle a breathing space. For almost a year after August 1975, when the policy was introduced, workers withheld their power; strikes fell to their lowest levels in a decade.



in 1978-79 workers were not afraid to take on the state and the labour government



It didn't last, perhaps because the "reward" workers received for their year of sacrifice was to be - more pay restraint. When the government insisted on imposing a year-long 5% pay limit in mid 1976, the reaction was not long in coming. In early 1977 a strike by British Leyland toolmakers pointed to the increasing discontent of relatively "privileged" workers; not long afterwards, steel industry electricians, seafarers and Heathrow Airport workers were also on strike. The unrest was not connected to the fact that prices were now rising by 15 per cent and the purchasing power of the average worker had fallen by 7 per cent in the past two years.

By the autumn, firefighters and power workers were on strike, and a hysterical flood of headlines - 'Callaghan Warns of Winter Strikes'; 'Lights Stay Off'; 'Blackout Threat to Kidney Patients' - gave some indication of what was to come. The mass of workers had clearly been prepared to continue with some notion of 'equality of sacrifice' to aid the survival of a Labour government - but only as long as it seemed to make any sense. And after mid 1976, it clearly was not. By late 1976 and early 1977, working-class militancy had burst from its restraints in a resurgence of resistance, and a legacy of bitterness, which culminated in the 1978-79 'Winter of Discontent'.

The WoD, then, hardly fell out of a clear blue sky; rather, it was the culmination of a long series of strikes and struggles against drastic attacks on workers' standards of living. Nor does its launch sustain the misconception that it was only weak and/or low-paid workers who took part. The first in the unbroken chain of disputes from late 1978 to mid 1979 was a 9-week strike over pay by Ford car workers which "drove a coach and horses" through Callaghan's incomes policy with a 17% settlement. The "speedy and unprecedented degree of external support Ford workers received from the outset" was attributed by a convenor to widespread resentment of the pay policy.

The 'Ford effect' was felt in a wave of strikes. Workers at British Oxygen won an 8% rise in October; 26,000 bakery workers, novices to industrial action, walked out in November and gained 14%. By December, oil tanker drivers from Esso, Shell and Texaco had begun strikes and overtime bans, while in early 1979 lorry drivers used flying pickets to spread their strike throughout the country.

As the lorry drivers departed the industrial stage, however, on came the public sector workers in whose name the Winter of Discontent is normally commemorated. On 22 January a one-day strike brought out over a million public sector workers; from this time on a variety of groups began coming out on strike in pursuit of their own pay claims. School caretakers struck at the beginning of February, supported in many cases by teachers. Water workers broke through the pay code at the end of February with a 16% increase; on 23 February, civil service unions began national action for a substantial claim. The public workers' struggle continued to stampede through almost every sector; picket lines appeared in front of hospitals, ambulance stations, refuse depots, schools, colleges and a host of other workplaces.

The media barrage is well-known, with "Rats on the Rampage" a typical comment. Yet rather than coming to the

strikers' defence against this ideological barrage, much of the labour movement leadership seemed equally horrified by the sight of uncollected rubbish and other reminders of their members' indispensability. TUC leader Len Murray was 'near to despair: this was not trade unionism, this was "syndicalism". Yet stentorian condemnations did nothing to stem the quasi-revolutionary dynamic. Not only 'syndicalism', but elements of dual power began to characterize the dispute: 'Within a short time strike committees were deciding what moved in and out of many of the ports and factories... In some cases strike committees controlled the public services of whole cities'.

Thatcher herself records in her memoirs that 'the Labour government had handed over the running of the country to local committees of trade unionists'; her fellow Tory James Prior complained that Britain was now being run by 'little Soviets' - local strike committees of lorry drivers, train drivers and other public sector groups beginning to come into the strike movement.

Paul Foot's account affirms the dynamic: "I still recall a sense of wonder and admiration at the way in which the transport drivers of Hull took control of their industry and ran it...in the best interests of the community. The ability - and the yearning - for democratic control was there in abundance".

As so often in disputes large and small, the action mobilised and built working-class participation and solidarity. Journalists reported that during their six-week strike "The impressive thing was how people who had never been on strike before manned the picket lines...they were totally at home with it, they accepted it. What comradeship there was!" FBU members turned up to the journalists' picket lines with braziers, while pallets of fuel "fell out of the back" of a Royal Mail pantechicon. Hardly the selfish sectionalism so disparaged by critics of the Winter.

Yet the outcome of this mobilisation, this solidarity, was not the triumph of the 'little Soviets', but victory for the emissaries of neo-liberalism. On 3 May 1979, Labour surrendered to Thatcher and all that she stood for.

This victory was by no means a foregone conclusion. During the election campaign itself, opinion polls varied sharply; two days before polling day, Labour was ahead 0.7 per cent.

Yet the Tories won by 7 per cent, more than enough to authorize Thatcher's mission to destroy social democracy.

The conventional explanation for the loss was the electorate's disgust with "trade union power" as symbolized in the industrial chaos of the Winter of Discontent. Yet the undoubted "unpopularity" of the strikes only accounted for about 1.5 to 2 per cent of the swing; the Tories' policies on industrial relations were not even at the top of voters' agendas. Nevertheless, almost the entire labour movement leadership took it for granted that it was "the unions" who had let in Thatcher. The question of what, or who, was lumped together in that formulation was not considered, any more than was the question of who held the "trade union power" she promised to vanquish.

There was indeed a form of power in the land during the Winter of Discontent - workers' power. It was shown only embryonically, but it was based not on 'greed', not on the Satanic motives with which the press embellished their tales of evil, but on the usual reasons - attacks by capital on workers' lives which go beyond the bounds of the tolerable. As one post-mortem pointed out, those who blamed Labour's defeat on 'union intransigence' might be hard put to it to explain "what it was that turned the social contracting trade union saints of 1975-78 into the demonic fiends about whom we read in the *Daily Mail* of last winter".

Those 'demonic fiends' did the only things that workers in struggle can do - they struck, they picketed, they stopped the movement of goods, they disrupted services. In that sense, these prosaic struggles of tanker drivers, gravediggers and dustmen also displayed the only power that workers can have; they withdrew their labour, with a force and to an extent that seriously challenged the organisation and structure of society. What they did not do was to display 'trade union power' in the monolithic, dictatorial way which the press, aided by politicians of right and left, sought to depict it.

Like all upsurges of struggle, the Winter of Discontent was raw, imperfect, lacking in ideal politics and strategy. Yet what its critics fail to recognise is that this is the character of grass-roots worker struggle in all its "spontaneous" and grassroots glory. The potential indisputably posed by such "economistic" activity - what are workers to struggle over, if not the price of their labour-power? - is that of a challenge to the capitalist class and state, as the rulers of that state undoubtedly recognised.

obituary of howard zinn: a people's historian

by Mark Harrison

It was with great sadness that I learnt of the death of Howard Zinn, who died of a heart attack on 27th January aged 87. When I was sixteen years old he was responsible for blowing my mind as I made my way through his *A People's History of the United States*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1981.

An important influence on my world view at a time before I had heard of a workers' council or understood the term dictatorship of the proletariat, he helped me develop an understanding that real change has never come from benevolent leaders but from the struggles of the working class fighting from below.

Amongst other concepts he introduced me to the revolutionary syndicalism and industrial democracy of the Industrial Workers of the World who accepted any worker no matter their sex, race or skill and participated in direct action and responded against the violence of the state with violence of

their own, whereas the bourgeois unions in the American Federation of Labour accepted capitalism, divided workers and held a belief of 'business unionism' that unions could become stronger by emulating corporations.

Zinn stood apart from other historians in that he did not only write about history but also participated in it. The son of poor Jewish immigrants he laboured in a shipyard before volunteering as a bombardier and participated in the first military use of napalm in a war he would later attack as inter-imperialist.

He began his formal education by taking advantage of the GI Bill, whilst working in a brewery and living with his wife in rat-infested slums. Attaining a BA from New York University and his MA and PhD from Columbia he would teach at the all black women's college, Spelman, where he led strikes and acted as an advisor for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he was eventually sacked for siding with students against segregation, later moving on to become a professor of politics at Boston University. He was one of the

first to see The Pentagon Papers and visited Vietnam during the Tet Offensive in order to negotiate the release of three American POWs.

Zinn seemed reluctant to define his political ideology, sometimes calling himself a democratic socialist and also speaking of a synthesis between Anarchism and Marxism, he apparently endorsed Ralph Nader, a supporter of immigration controls, in the 2008 presidential election.

In one of his last interviews he said he wanted to be remembered, for getting more people to realize that the power which appears to rest in the hands of people with wealth and guns, ultimately rests in people themselves and that they can use it.

I think you succeeded in that comrade, many times over.

★ *A People's History* has been made into a documentary which broadcast on The History Channel in December, it is now available for pre-order on DVD.

political platform of our communist network

1. Our Politics

We are communists: we fight for a new self-managed society based on collective ownership of the means of production and distribution and an economy organised not for value production but for the well-being of humanity and in harmony with our natural environment. Communism will abolish the system of wage-labour so that our ability to work will cease to be a commodity to be sold to an employer; it will be a truly classless society; there will be no state, no managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

We are internationalists: we seek the greatest possible collaboration with communists in other countries; we build solidarity with workers' movements around the world; we are opposed to all borders and immigration controls; and we are opposed to all forms of oppression of nationalities.

We know that communism can only come from below, through the organisations of the workers themselves. This conception of communism has nothing in common with the fake "socialisms" of the Stalinist state planning of the former USSR, of the sweatshops of China, and social-democratic "humane" capitalism. No nation in the world today is communist, nowhere is the economy managed by the workers. These models of "socialism" have all proven to be complete failures, maintaining and in many cases aggravating the working class's lack of self-determination. There is no particular connection between socialism and nationalisation by the state, which merely replaces one set of managers with another; alongside fighting day-to-day battles we advocate a struggle for vestiges of workers' control in the here and now as preparatory steps towards real workers' self-management and collective ownership.

We are the most consistent advocates of social liberation in all its forms. We fight sexual repression, sexism and homophobia and advocate sexual liberation; we champion anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles; we oppose all limits to free-

dom of speech and free cultural expression. These struggles are not just some adjunct to working-class struggle but are the cornerstone of democracy and human freedom. We know that it is impossible for the working class to fight for and create a communist society if it is unable to control its own organisations: we support rank and file movements against the bureaucrats who lord it over the unions and parties of the left; we are for openness and democracy in the workers' movement.

We have no gods, not even revolutionary ones. We reject the practice of using the works of this or that socialist of decades past as sacred texts from which "revealed truths" can be read off as gospel. The "traditions" to which the traditional left groups appeal are universally ahistorical and anachronistic, used for the sake of feigning historical legitimacy rather than to critically examine and draw lessons from the past. We believe that the defeats of the workers' movement in the last three decades; the decay of the left and the absolute poverty of its ideas and slogans; its abandonment of class politics; and the sectarianism of the groups vying for supremacy with their own front campaigns and so-called unity projects; are all evidence of the need for ground-up rethinking of the left's project and the re-composition of the workers' movement.

2. Our Organisation

We are a network of communists committed to the self-emancipation of the working class, internationalism and opposition to imperialism and all forms of oppression. We reject statist and authoritarian visions of socialism and look instead to the tradition of 'socialism from below', which believes that emancipation can be achieved only through the activity, self-organisation and mobilisation of the working class and oppressed people themselves. Our goal is a communist society, which will abolish the system of wage-labour: a classless society with no state, managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

Communist revolutions cannot succeed without mass self-organisations of workers, and the leadership of organisations of revolutionary workers and the oppressed. We are a network whose aim is to contribute to the development of such a movement in this country and internationally. We agree to establish ourselves as an organising committee of individual supporters.

We shall function on the basis of consensus or if necessary majority vote: a motion is carried by a vote of more than half (50% plus one) of the people with voting rights in attendance.

3. Membership

We welcome the affiliation of any individual who accepts our platform as our basis of unity, supports our activities practically and financially, and accepts these principles of organisation. All members may speak, move motions and vote at meetings. Those who join us in these committees do so freely by an acceptance of these general principles. Others, who are not members, are free to contribute material for the paper and to participate in the discussions of the network.

4. A pluralist communist network

The Commune is a paper, a flow of pamphlets, and an organisation of activists with new ideas. Our purpose is to develop and extend these ideas, to promote their discussion and, wherever possible, to act upon them. Our aim is to create a pluralist organisation, a network of committees whose members come together to promote their ideas in an organised manner and to renew them in the practice of the class struggle. Any member or group of members has the right to form an open tendency (platform) to present their views at any time. We reject sectarian vanguardism and adhere to the principle that communists have no interests separate and apart from those of the working class as a whole.

subscribe!

Read it—£12 a year (£16 EU, £20 int'l)
Sell it—£4 a month to receive five copies

To _____ bank plc,
Branch address _____
Postcode _____
Re account name _____
Sortcode _____ Account No. _____
Please pay to **The Commune**, Co-op A/C No. 65317440, S/C
No. 089299, the sum of £ _____ every month until further notice, commencing on _____
This replaces any previous order from this account.
Signed _____
Name (PRINT) _____
Date _____
Address _____

I enclose payment:
Sub. £ _____
Donation £ _____
TOTAL £ _____
Date _____
Name _____
Address _____
Postcode _____
Email _____
Tel _____
Send a cheque or postal order payable to 'The Commune' to The
Commune, 2nd Floor, 145-157 St. John Street, London EC1V 4PY