

occupations  
against cuts  
page 2



ubs cleaners  
fight on  
page 6



supplement  
on workers'  
councils  
page 7



# the ★ commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below issue 12, march 2010 £1

## a labour of love?

our movement mustn't pay for gordon brown's crisis: cut the labour link

editorial of *The Commune*

As the general election nears, millions are worried by the sweeping public sector cuts planned by all three main parties.

Labour and the Tories' plans are not the same. Gordon Brown's government plan a more gradual process of cuts in public service provision and jobs.

However, the intention of this policy is to avoid stalling UK plc's economic recovery by cutting the budget deficit too fast. It is not borne out of a desire to defend or promote free and high quality public services, still less the jobs of those working for them. Labour's cuts will not seem too benign or 'gradual' to the 20,000 council staff due to be made redundant this spring.

Yet rather than organising resistance to this massive assault on working class living standards, which is already taking place, much of the official labour movement seems more concerned with re-electing the current, openly pro-business government.

This is lucky for Brown, whose election fund is mostly union money. Thanks to their affiliation to Labour, in 2009 the Unite union ploughed £3.6 million into party coffers. The CWU, who represent under-attack postal workers, pay £1 million a year.

There have been moves to break the union link: in a consultative ballot in September 96% of London post workers voted to suspend CWU funding of Labour. Yet still, in exchange for half-promises to members – and favours for would-be-MP union bureaucrats (see page 5) – union leaders think



*martial law: the labour party shamelessly champion british imperialism*

turkeys should not only vote for Christmas, but also pay for the privilege. It would be more democratic for branches to be able to dispose of political funds and back candidates as they choose.

Unfortunately, many on the radical left who previously supported moves to stop union funding to Labour have now fallen silent on the issue, since they are supporting the government in the election.

For example the Socialist Workers' Party believe that re-electing the government will somehow increase workers' confidence to fight back against the government's plans. They have cast aside their analysis that Labour is 'no longer' a workers' party.

But they were right before: affiliation serves less as a means for workers to control or

'reclaim' Labour, than it does as a means for the union leaders to control their members by shackling our organisations to the government. This means the stifling of collective action, not its politicisation. Indeed, the government will fight the election not only on a programme of 'slower cuts', but also continuing the imperialist war in Afghanistan, and anti-immigrant rhetoric often even worse than that of the Tories.

Labour may well appear as the 'least worst' choice at the general election. But if workers are to avoid carrying the burden for the recession then we must break out of the cycle of supporting the lesser evil. Securing political and organisational independence for our movement is vital not only to resist the recession but to start forging the type of movement the working class needs.

## strong pickets in two-day pcs strike

by Steve Ryan

Wrexham PCS

Despite the usual bosses' claims to the contrary the PCS two-day strike on 8th-9th March looks to have been solid and successful. Some 250,000 workers took part in the action.

Offices were closed and services disrupted all over the UK. Significant also was the size of the picket lines, full of ordinary workers not just the usual activists. This clearly unsettled the bosses as many lines were challenged – with no success! The mood was very determined and angry.

Its now game on as PCS national executive await a response from government, who are now having to think about the effect of the strike, not just in its effect on services, but the fact that many members of the unions who caved in over the compensation scheme are clamouring to join PCS, seen as a union that will defend members' interests. This can spread. Public support was good, as was media attention. Support from other unions was excellent, and from organisations such as the National Shop Stewards Network.

If Labour decides to stick it out then a political game will be played with the election coming. However this will need to be built on industrially. There is now an national overtime ban, which will help expose cuts in service. Rather than more strikes straight away there should be a series of rolling actions hitting vulnerable targets in a range of departments and agencies. Anathema though it is to the NEC, a levy may be needed to back up what could be a long period of action.

Strike committees need to be formed.

In the meantime communists should be building on the emerging rank and file links that are being forged to push for wider and deeper action and to be ready when (it won't be 'if') other workers come into the struggle against the cuts.

Links should be made with those already fighting back elsewhere, such as in Greece

Most importantly now is a good time to engage the political arguments about why these cuts happen, and what the real solution is: workers' self management and communism from below.

## english defence league march on parliament

by Amanda Latimer

On March 6th, the fascists marched on Parliament. More disturbing than their actual presence or message, however, was the fact that someone let them in the front door.

The English Defence League's (EDL) march on Parliament was called with three days' notice to welcome the visit of the far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders to the House of Lords. Somewhere between the "free speech" placards carried by the 200 or so EDL supporters, the predictable mire of nationalist and fascist salutes and equally predictable targets of their racism, was a feeling that, as one anti-fascist demonstrator put it, "This shouldn't be happening." The march flew in the face of a long-standing rule that no one can march on Parliament whilst it is in session; a rule that was not simply broken by the EDL, but accommodated by the State. What kind of message does it send when a far-right

group is not only given permission for such an extraordinary action, but when their right to "deliver their message" is accompanied by a police presence in the hundreds, also convened over three short days?

It conveys several, actually. First, that the police are more than willing to crack down on anti-fascist mobilisations to preserve the "democratic expression" of groups like the EDL. Of the 50 or so arrests that day, most were made against anti-fascist demonstrators as they were assembling in a nearby park, while dozens of others were loaded onto buses, taken to the proverbial "edge of town" and told to go home. It's hard not to conclude that the police were clearing the way for the fascists to deliver their hate-filled message to Parliament in peace.

Secondly, in the run-up to the elections, the Labour Party and its ideologues have declared open season on immigrant workers, regardless of their status or degree of "belonging" to Britain. Gordon Brown's 2007 opportunistic call for "British jobs for

British workers" will likely figure prominently in Labour's approach to the crisis at election time, insofar as the consensus amongst even mainstream economists is that the real recession is only beginning.

Less than a week previous to the EDL march, Polly Toynbee published a Labour *mea culpa* in the *Guardian* (see 'Our borders are porous', 27th February) in which she admitted that the Labour Party's unwillingness to deal seriously with immigration has left England "vulnerable" to an onslaught of low-skilled foreign workers (of various hues) for over a decade. This is in stark contrast to the reality of thousands of precarious immigrant and native workers in England who are having the brunt of the crisis dumped on their shoulders. While banks saw record profits and bonuses last year, thousands were losing work and thousands more losing ground in the fight for fair compensation and, as explained on page 6, the very right to unionise.

continues on page 3 >>

# turbulent times for public sector

by David Huckerby

According to research by the *Independent* newspaper, 20,000 council workers throughout England, Scotland and Wales face redundancy as forward planning for drastic government cuts take effect. Whatever the outcome of the general election the public sector will face austerity job cuts, cuts in services and attacks on terms and conditions.

Sheffield Council is one of local authorities identified where jobs are threatened. The director of Sheffield Homes, the council's housing service has raised the spectre of at least forty job cuts in the financial year 2010/11 with more to follow. Over two hundred jobs have been lost in housing in the last few years. A recruitment freeze has been in place for some time. The council is the largest employer in the city so local unemployment is rising.



*sheffield homes workers are on the sharp end of sweeping cuts in local authority budgets*

But if the planning for job cuts is coming from the New Labour government, so are the tactics for dealing with the unions. The regional and local officials of the GMB and UNISON were told by the director of Sheffield Homes that the modern way to consult was a management online survey of staff. This completely bypassed the machinery of consultation and negotiation procedure with the trade unions, which is a legal requirement. It was not surprising then that the UNISON area officer backed up a housing steward's call for a mass meeting, which had faced some hesitation and doubts.

The mass meeting was called as a joint meeting with all the unions UNITE, UNISON and GMB. This had its strong side in terms of a chance for a collective expression of opposition to cuts right across the union divide, but because it was outside the constitutional structure of each individual union no motion could be taken on action. About half of Sheffield Homes' staff – of a little over 1,000 – turned out for the lunchtime meeting in the Grand City Hall meeting room, and more came to the early evening meeting.

A local GMB official saw the meeting as a meeting where members would listen to the regional officers and then go back to work. He told the meeting how privileged they were to have the presence of the regional officers. Once the union leaders had spoken, he tried to gag the meeting by insisting there could be no speeches, only brief questions. He also kept stating that if anyone wanted to go back to work they could. No one accepted his invitation. The housing steward whose motion had initiated the motion then defied the restriction on speeches by making a speech emphasising collective strength in numbers as opposed to the lack of influence and clout of individuals in the online survey: basic trade union points.

Once the meeting warmed up the mood became surprisingly militant. It took a while for the mood to develop since most people were not used to union meetings since very few are called. But this mood will be squandered if the individual unions do not follow up with further meeting focused on action.

Any feeling for action will come up against ballots and the long drawn out frustration of that process that usually takes the bureaucracy many weeks to organise even if they do not deliberately block attempts at strike action. Moreover, any attempts at strike action are undermined by the privatisation of key services such as Housing Benefits (run by Capita).

The latest position is that senior management – the twelve people who earn more than £50,000 a year – are now "re-designing" the service. This is not good news for council tenants or the thousands of people registered with the council looking for affordable rented housing.

# student anti-cuts movement has managers running scared

by Tali Janner-Klausner

This academic year, an ever-increasing number of students are seeing budget cuts at their university translate into sacked staff and lecturers, cutbacks of university support services such as counseling, whole departments threatened with closure and the like.

However with this has come a burgeoning anti-cuts movement across the country, with many new campaigns set up on individual campuses.

Some campaigns have taken the stance that their department should be saved at the expense of another, but many others have been imaginative, militant and oriented towards working with staff.

Many students are taking political action for the first time and have a lot to gain, both practically and in terms of their own perspectives on the situation, from coordinating with others. Meanwhile the threat of higher tuition fees looms just past the general election.

In response to this, the National Convention Against Fees and Cuts was held in early February at University College London. 150-odd students from universities, colleges and schools throughout the country came and attended workshops on practical issues like working with trade unions on and off campus, as well as theoretical discussions such as what sort of education do we want.

Regional networks were set up and in the final session, the conference voted to form the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) and call for a wave of action on campuses, starting from 1st March.

This has got off to a great start, especially considering the stagnation of the British student movement in the past two decades and the burden of a right wing NUS that no longer even calls for free education. Just two days after the Convention, over 100 students at Sussex University, which is facing a catastrophic £8 million in budget cuts over the next two academic years, occupied the conference room at their campus and held it for two days.

Soon after, a mass meeting of students, lecturers and staff at Westminster University voted no confidence in their Vice-Chancellor, with the prospect of 190 academic and 90 administrative job losses while management salaries have gone up at an average of 25%.

A week and a half later, a protest against cuts stormed the governors meeting and proceeded to take over the Vice Chancellor's office, and then occupied main management and administration rooms of the university for three days, supported by Westminster UCU. Leeds University's anti-cuts campaign joined UCU members at a demonstration against cuts. Powerful, quick bursts of action such as these that challenge the very idea of who controls the university have started to frighten university managements.

At the University of East Anglia a well-attended protest on March 3rd was accompanied by a heavy police presence, disgracefully called in by the university management.

On the same day, a large protest and sit-in was held at UCL and the Sussex UCU branch voted overwhelmingly to take strike action later in the month. There was also a brief occupation the university, which was met with disgraceful police violence – riot police with dogs and pepper spray attacked the protesters and picked off individuals. Following this, six students were suspended for thirty days and threatened with expulsion, and a High Court Injunction was granted to the Vice Chancellor prohibiting protest on campus!

These are the actions of a management that is running scared, trying to make an example of a few students so as to intimidate many. In fact, this unjust reaction has galvanized students at Sussex, who have begun a campaign of photographing hundreds of students holding signs declaring "I occupied Sussex House".

There was also a well attended teach-in held at Kings College London, organized by the No Cuts at Kings campaign and the UCU left and SWP lead London Education Activists Network. It was noted at the conference that restricting all managerial salaries at Kings to £100,000, about four times the national average wage, would save £9 million, while the proposed cuts would see the back of 10% of staff and the closure of at least one department. This is a familiar story for many universities.



*on march 11th 300 students at sussex occupied in defiance of a court injunction*

Citing the Treasury's apparent need to claw back money from public services due to the recession, Peter Mandelson has announced a reduction of £449million in overall higher education spending this year alone, with worse likely to come whoever wins the election this spring.

The fact that higher education now comes under Lord Mandelson's remit as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills is one of many indicators that these cuts are part of a wider trend of sweeping neoliberal "reforms", to subordinate education to the needs of business and capital. Schemes such as the National Student Survey champion the notion that students are consumers.

By this logic, tuition fees are a necessary part of the transaction, as is the increasing proliferation of managerial hierarchies modeled on the business world, at the expense of academic freedom and teaching quality. The priorities of the government are clear – the number of managers at universities has risen over three times as fast as academics since 2003. Universities UK, the insidious organisation of British Vice-Chancellors, defended this by saying that universities have a broader role these days, which included "forging much closer links with business".

But the NCAFC and many others are fighting for universities that are about students themselves, and the value of education for its own sake. Meanwhile more actions are planned in the near future, nationally and on individual campuses, and the UCU is gearing up for a coordinated strike day on 29th April. We have a long way to go, but the fightback against cuts in Britain can start to consider itself a force to be reckoned with.

## some upcoming events

★ Education Activists' Network meeting – Tuesday 16th March, 6.30pm at Strand campus of KCL. Room TBC.

★ Planned strike action at Sussex and Leeds universities and support – Thursday 18th March

★ UCU "defend jobs, defend education!" demonstration – 20th March, meet 12pm at KCL Strand Campus for march to Downing Street

★ London and Southern regions Campaign Against Fees and Cuts meeting – Wednesday 24th March, 6pm at SOAS. Room TBC

★ Planned UCU coordinated strike action day – 29th April

★ For more info on the national campaign visit <http://conventionagainstfeesandcuts.wordpress.com>



# dawn of the crisis generation

★On 4th March thousands of workers and students across California took action in protest against budget cuts, lay-offs and fee hikes caused by the state's financial crisis. This article from Indybay was written after 157 people were arrested for occupying the I-880 motorway.

"Why the hell did you get on that highway?" asked the cops, our cell mates, our coworkers, our classmates. There are many responses that could be given that have been outlined by banners, occupation demands, student leaders, or budget statistics, but none of them really connect to why one would take over a highway. Obviously there are no libraries on a highway. The funding for schools isn't going to be found on any one of those lanes of oncoming traffic. And, in fact, a lot of people who were arrested on the highway were not students or teachers. This is because the highway takeover is an action against a power structure that is much larger than this year's budget crisis.

That morning we awakened to newspaper headlines stating the governor's support for sanctioned student protests. We weren't the least bit impressed by this patronising rhetoric. Our motivations for walking up that on ramp to 880 were far deeper and broader than some piddly demand for a return of the same: an education system that has for a long time been the bedrock to our highly divided class system in the United States.

The myth that change will come to this society by poor people reaching middle class status through the university makes no sense; a school degree does not impact the condition of the neighborhoods and families we come from. It should also now be clear to everyone that ritualized demonstrations that fail to break out of the normal functioning of society represent nothing more than the further consolidation of state power.

What fails to concretely disrupt the system ultimately strengthens it. We know that if we "win" funding from Governor Schwarzenegger this is no victory, but a diversion of funds from one group of already-struggling people to pacify another, without changing shit. For example, plans are in the works that will take money from the health care of prisoners in order to fatten university administrators' pockets. We refuse to accept a shallow bribe that places "our" interests in competition with those of our potential comrades.

It was our experience on the highway that made the question of who our allies and adversaries are infinitely clear. As we ran up the on-ramp behind hand-held flares declaring our occupation of the freeway, inmates in the adjacent jail pounded on their cell windows in excitement. Later, after the police beatings, as we sat in cuffs on the other side of the freeway, yuppies held a sign in the windows of their condominiums reading "Fuck U Protesters," as commuters who were stuck in traffic honked and cheered for us.

For a few hours we substantially disrupted commerce; shipments of products were delayed and crowds at local shopping malls dwindled. On the day-to-day we don't, in any tangible way, have any sway over the systems that rule our lives. We had many slogans and ideas in each of our individual brains from all the speeches and banners having to do with fee hikes, demands to Sacramento, blah blah. But underneath all of our different reasons we could formulate for media quotes and skeptical friends was a desire to exercise some sort of power over a system that we really have no control over.



For those of us who are not students, those who labour in the service industry, who live precariously on welfare benefits, who share overcrowded rooms, who can't pay the rent and are months behind on the utilities, for those of us who are told everyday that we are nothing, taking over the highway was an assertion of our collective power.

It is unlikely that anything we have ever done has had as great an effect on our surroundings. The sight of miles of traffic brought to a standstill was an indication of a true, if fleeting, glimpse of the havoc we are capable of.

As has been echoed many times since the fall of 2008, we are not making this shit up: We Are The Crisis.

Each action brings another inspiration and another lesson. The highway takeover was not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. We sat in our jail cells shaking our heads asking ourselves and others why we decided to march on the 880. Some of us felt pressure to connect the action to the education budget crisis. Some of us felt like it was a huge tactical error to enter onto a freeway overpass without escape routes. But somehow, despite these apprehensions and valid concerns, we decided to go anyway.

This is a message to affirm and congratulate that instinct that forced our feet forward to shut down a major artery of the bay area.

Next time we will strike when it is even more unexpected; when the state is not prepared. We will choose terrain that is to our tactical advantage and not allow ourselves to be so caught up in symbolic locations. We will continue to wait long hours outside of jail houses and in courtrooms for each other. In each action we take we gain confidence in the power we have together. Soon we will be unfuckwithable.

During a police charge on the 880, 15 year-old Francois Zimany fell from the 25 foot high overpass, sustaining fractures to his skull, pelvis, and wrist. Initial reports suggested that he was pushed by police officers, newer information indicates that he most likely fell trying to escape arrest. In either situation, we hold the Oakland Police Department responsible for his injuries. Francois, we don't know you, but we love you. We are comrades for life.

# recession bites in united states

by Dennis Marcucci  
from Philadelphia

Worse than expected economic reports and job cut announcements show that the prospects for working people in the USA and around the world are going to worsen. After all, most of the world is capitalist, and most of the world is poor. So what does that tell you about this canker sore of an economic system?

Wall Street economists had said that unemployment claims would fall below 450,000. They were wrong. There was only a slight decrease to 470,000. Any reports have to be viewed with suspicion: what is not being reported is (i) workers who exhausted their benefits and are now off the rolls and are viewed as employed; (ii) workers who were collecting benefits and found part time minimum wage employment; and (iii) workers working temp jobs or contract work.

Once the work under contract has been fulfilled, they are either unemployed or they go on to the next contracted job. The temp jobs mentioned have no benefits, no social security, no health insurance, no unemployment benefits and no rights to compensation. So if you are hurt on the job, or you can't find another temp position, you're on your own.

The poor weekly jobless claims come on the heels of a series of mass layoff announcements. Telecommunications giant, Verizon said that it would cut about 13,000 jobs over the course of 2010 because it is scaling back its landline phone service. Wal-Mart said it would cut 11,000 jobs at its Sams Club subsidiary. Pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson announced it would cut 8,000 jobs over the year. UK based Pharmaceutical firm AstraZenica said it would cut 8,000 jobs from its global workforce.

Macy's department store will cut 1,500 jobs by March 4th and will close 5 stores, laying off 307. Home improvement giant Home Depot will soon layoff 1,000 at their Atlanta-based headquarters. Computer magnate Larry Ellison said after his firm Oracle takes over Sun Microsystems, some employees will become redundant, which will result in 2,000 sackings. Smithfield foods will close its Sioux City plant resulting in 1,500 layoffs. Tyson Foods will remove 500 jobs when it closes its Council Bluffs plant. And Time Warner will cut 350 jobs from its national division management arm in Denver.

What capitalists don't understand, since it is an unplanned economy, is that each business depends on every other business's employees as potential customers. When one company decides to get "lean and mean" and layoff workers to boost profits, those layoffs affect every business in the surrounding area. This happened when GM laid off 30,000 workers and closed 11 plants.

This caused the domino effect. Furniture stores, clothing stores, grocery stores and even a hospital all closed down, which caused all of the employees working for the latter to lose their jobs.

Until workers see this system and life within it as not being a natural, healthy way to live, and unless workers adopt a new way of thinking and create its self-expression within the old system, things will get much worse.

# the fightback in greece: lightning strikes twice

by David Broder

On 24th February a general strike brought Greece's planes, trains and buses to a standstill; left schools quiet and government offices empty; and brought thousands of raucous demonstrators into the streets of Athens.

Not only was this the second nationwide strike against the budget cuts plan in two weeks, but also marked continued defiance against the new social-democratic PASOK government, just over a year after the December 2008 struggle against the right-wing New Democracy administration.

That movement saw a wave of occupations of public buildings, including universities, town halls and libraries, but also the Athens offices of the GSEE trade union federation, which kept a clear distance from the protests. They were unwilling to 'touch' such a radical struggle, and indeed cancelled demonstrations against the New Year state budget in case they were diverted.

This February, however, the Greek government proposed swingeing cuts to reduce their deficit by 4% per year and

the unions have had no choice but to mobilise. The GSEE and ADEDY federations both called for a one-day strike, including two million workers of both public and private sectors. Nonetheless, some of the media over here charmingly focussed on the effects on British holiday-makers, customers dissatisfied with that giant tourist destination, Greece.

This was not just a stay-at-home strike. 40,000 demonstrated in Athens and thousands more in towns and cities across Greece. Young people are particularly at risk in a country where unemployment stands at 10%, and there were also clashes between young protestors and riot police. Restaurants, shops and banks were smashed up – or, in the photo below, walled in:

The 'deep cuts' agenda is not a specifically Greek phenomenon, with the governments of the so-called 'PIIGS' (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain), mid-ranking EU states running up huge deficits, all under pressure from the EU to cut their budgets – and thus targeting working class living standards. Of course Britain too faces either 'Tory cuts', good-old-fashioned 'Labour cuts', or rather less likely Lib Dem 'savage cuts'.

As we went to press on March 11th a further general strike was underway. but a series of national one-day strikes does not look like a strategy to stop the government. After all, while tolerating occasional demonstrations the state will not shrink from invoking anti-union laws and using riot cops to suppress the most 'threatening' wing of the movement. Before the general strike, an indefinite stoppage by 3,200 customs workers saw Greece's petrol pumps run dry for five days, such that the courts intervened to rule the action 'excessive'. The union put an end to the strike, even though they could have been given even greater strength by the national strike action.

The BBC commented: "The march was three times bigger than one held two weeks ago during the last 24-hour stoppage, our correspondent adds, but given that two million people were supposedly on strike, it was hardly the start of a revolution." Indeed a one-day general strike will not bring down capitalism. But in Greece protestors in the streets; youth fighting the police a year ago and today; and those working-class people keeping the cars off the roads and the planes on the ground; have shown a fine example of how to resist the recession.

# tory co-operatives mean privatisation

by Gregor Gall

The longstanding cross party consensus on cooperatives has taken a nasty turn. Traditionally, all the main parties have all supported – albeit a token way – the ideas of cooperatives.

For 'old', social democratic Labour, this has been about supporting workers and extending industrial democracy. Here the notion was that workers should be supported when they try to buck the outcomes of the market, even if cooperatives were a far from perfect means to do so.

For the Tories, workers' cooperatives have always been more about workers being entrepreneurs and capitalists. They hoped that capitalism could be given a smattering of a people's property-owning democracy – as in the way that they trumpeted share ownership as creating a form of people's capitalism back in the 1980s because of privatisation.

But now both Labour and Tories have happened upon this forgotten idea and turned it into something quite different. No longer are they talking about coops in the private sector but coops in the public sector.

Faced with a desperately fought forthcoming election, the discrediting of the neo-liberalism consensus and the desire to further reduce the size of the public sector, both main parties have decided that workers' cooperatives can be used as a clever way to further dismantle the public services.

This is a game of smoke and mirrors. Give workers what seems like control over their jobs and the services they provide but only allow them to do so where they have to operate under market conditions.

Guess which bit will have more influence on the other bit? Yes, the market will influence the coops far more than the coops will ever influence the market.

So these coops will be in competition with each other for resources and customers – yes, users of services will still be called 'customers'.



*co-ops like john lewis are run on the same principles as any other capitalist business*

And with competition, the benefits of cooperation and coordination will be lost.

But there is much more that is worse about this vision of a brave new world for our public services.

On the one hand, the workers of these coops will get the blame for making the difficult decisions that will affect our services in times of reduced funding. This will shift the blame away from the party in government and the economic system that we live under.

On the other hand, the element of popular control over our services that we currently have will be drastically reduced. These coops will be able to empire build and protect their vested interests.

Here, the real and present danger will be that they put their interests before those of the public they are supposed to serve.

So upon the launch of the Tories' new fangled coops policy, Unison was correct to say 'don't be fooled by the Tories conversion to co-operatives ... This is just another Tory Party plan to break up public services, plunge them into confusion and then let the private sector pick over their bones'.

And so UNITE was just as right to point out that 'David Cameron is using the language of socialism to mask the break-up of public services. He is mangling the English language to advance his anti-state ideology'.

The GMB pitched in with this is 'the wrong idea at the wrong time', questioning the supposed democracy and accountability created, and suggesting the idea was 'just a political gimmick'.

But in the heat of an election period, let's not be so naive here that we think if we just reject the Tories' policy that everything will be alright.

Labour's plans are no better. Labour may favour a model based on an imitation of the John Lewis partnership. But this will produce the same results as the Tories' plan, give or take a minor detail or two.

## nationalisation or workers' management?

A pamphlet by *The Commune* challenging both statist and market variants of socialism and advocating democratic control of workplaces.

Articles by Solidarity, the Institute for Workers' Control, the Left Economics Advisory Panel and others.

£1 + 50p postage per copy: use payment details from back page or email [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com).

# no surprises as rat boards sinking ship

by Chris Ford

There is a long history of British trade union leaders becoming Members of Parliament. This has often represented the next step by individuals whose primary concern is the advancement of a cause very dear to their hearts – their own self-interest.

In some cases however there are those who have genuinely sought to take the workers' struggle in the industrial front into the political arena: individuals with principle who have sought to maintain a loyalty and commitment to the labour movement, such as John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn. The coming general election should see a new recruit from union ranks – Jack Dromey, the Deputy General Secretary of UNITE.

Jack Dromey is a leading figure in the UNITE organising department, spearheading a strategy for growth and revitalisation. The organising department has some connection to recruitment and organising of migrant workers. Dromey himself holds the cause of migrant labour dear to his heart. But we should not get our hopes up. Dromey provides a case study of just what is wrong with the established labour movement. It is the story of how a 'red' became a rat!

Dromey came to prominence in the Grunwick dispute in Brent, North London in 1976-1977. It involved migrant workers who protested their dire wages and working conditions. They organized into the union APEX and were sacked by the anti-union bigot George Ward. Dromey was a leader of the Brent Trades Union Council. At Grunwick these heroic, mainly Asian women took on the force of the employers, the state and the union bureaucrats. They received solidarity from across our movement, with the miners providing the muscle of mass pickets and Cricklewood Postal workers taking wildcat action.

Dromey was in the thick of it – he recalled with pride how these other unions "to their credit, were prepared to put themselves on the line unashamedly in solidarity with fellow workers". The right wing union bureaucrats, the Labour Party and the TUC betrayed the Grunwick struggle: the postal workers were disciplined by their own union as were the strikers themselves for going on hunger strike outside



*there can be little surprise at labour stooge jack dromey's easy route to becoming candidate in a safe seat*

TUC Congress House. Their main concern was maintaining the Labour government in office, not these migrant workers. The defeat at Grunwick was a turning point, setting the scene for the capitalist counter-offensive under Thatcher's leadership.

Dromey co-authored, *Grunwick: the Workers' Story* published by the Communist Party in 1978. But whilst everyone else suffered from blacklisting, victimisation and struggled to get their life back together, Dromey, as a Labour MP once told me, was the 'only one who made a career out of Grunwick'. It is a career in the trade union movement in which Dromey has continued to be associated with migrant workers. But according to Dromey 'unreconstructed trade unionism' played into the hands of the Tories – so he reconstructed himself into the New Labour project of neo-liberalised social-democracy and social-partnership trade unionism.

Dromey complained that "rich men are too influential at Downing Street", but was not himself so observant as La-

bour Party Treasurer when he failed to notice in 2006 that £3.5 million in loans were made by donors who were then given life peerages. One can't help but feel, despite his denials, that his conclusion was – if you can't beat them, join them!

In his quest to become an MP Dromey failed to be even short listed in Pontefract Labour Party in 1997, so in 2007 he tried again. Not being a rich man himself, Dromey used someone else's money – that of UNITE members. According to Labour's own General Secretary, £1 million was donated on the assumption Dromey would be given the safe seat in Wolverhampton North East in the event of an election. Three years later, another seat has been found for Jack, this time in Birmingham Erdington where he has been a parachuted in. Just to make things easier for the 'preferred candidate', the all-women short listing was abandoned for an 'open contest'.

What about the cause of the migrant workers, who after all helped propel Dromey to prominence? In 2009 cleaners, all migrant workers working for the company Mitie at the Willis insurance, were victimised by the company. They fought back and called on their union to support them just as the Grunwick workers had before them. Dromey responded with a letter declaring the withdrawal of official union support, stating he felt that the company and UNITE had done all it could for them.

Even when immigration police brutally arrested UNITE members and deported them, Dromey was silent. After disputes at Willis, Schrodgers, and UBS it is clear migrant workers have provided nothing but an advertising opportunity for bureaucrats like Dromey in UNITE. Dromey boasts of the Grunwick strikers that whilst they were loyal to their union they were not necessarily respectful of the union bureaucracy. When it has happened in UNITE we see the Latin American Workers' Association having their office closed at UNITE HQ and elected reps disciplined.

Next month Jack Dromey will cease to be Assistant General Secretary of UNITE, and will then become a Member of Parliament. He will then complete his journey from a red to rat.

# defend migrant cleaners at UBS!

★At the start of February the Swiss bank UBS transferred full control of its cleaning operations to contractor Lancaster. While the workers should have had the right to the same conditions, Lancaster has imposed reductions in hours.

The workers have to do the same workload in less time, for the same hourly rate: effectively a 10.75% pay cut. The cleaners, all of whom are migrant workers, have defied refused to sign the new contracts and have been going into work at their previous timetabled hours. However the shop steward Alberto Durango has been victimised.

A cleaners' defence committee has been formed to support the struggle (see details in box below) and two demonstrations have taken place, demanding Alberto's reinstatement and the maintenance of cleaners' conditions. Here we present some of the speeches at these protests.

**Andy Higginbottom**  
Colombia Solidarity Campaign

The official title is Union Bank of Switzerland. Well, I've got nothing against unions, I've got nothing against the Swiss, but I have got something against bankers. That's why we've called for the renaming of UBS – one of the candidates must be 'Universal Blood Suckers'.

UBS get their wealth from all over the world, and we say shame on UBS, for paying its cleaners, also from all over the world, poverty wages. And now even those poverty wages are being cut by almost 11%.

Did the workers in this building [UBS Capital HQ] – or rather, taking their extended lunch breaks near this building – create the wealth that this building represents? No. These are the blood-suckers, the vampires of British imperialism. Where did they get their riches from? From Latin America, from Africa, from all over the world, as well as workers in this country.

It's not only an irony, it's the beginning of justice, that the chickens are coming home to roost. Those oppressed by imperialism are today working in the City of London. Every single one of those seven storeys is cleaned and maintained by immigrant workers. They are super-exploited, oppressed and downtrodden by the same blood-suckers who robbed their countries in the first place. Who made them leave Colombia, who made them have to leave their countries all over the world, and leave their families in order to come here for the 'right' to be exploited.

There is a new movement in the City of London: the likes of Alberto and the cleaners here who are standing up and fighting for their rights, fighting for their dignity as human beings and as workers. There is a new type of solidarity on the streets of London. It started with the pickets outside the Willis insurance building going on all last year. There are some in the movement who want to destroy this flame of courage and hope. But they are the forces of the past: you here are the forces of the future. The beginning of the end is this fightback.

**Jerry Hicks**  
Candidate for UNITE general secretary

To be employed one day, to be sold like a commodity the next, to be suspended the following day and sacked two



over 70 people turned out for a picket of UBS on 12th february

days later - less than 100 hours, sold and sacked - is a disgrace.

The employers know only too well the strength of organised workers. When a global company like UBS employs someone like Lancaster to carry their dirty deeds, using their weapons of fear, threats, union-busting, bullying, strike-breaking and harassment, they unleash their weapons against us.

Then there are our tools: the labour movement, trade union organisations, networks, support groups: that's called solidarity. I'm standing in UNITE, and I'll say this because it's true: in one union alone there are 1.7 million members. There are millions of us, and with solidarity we could and should change things. Because the employers know only too well that our activity strengthens our hand and solidarity weakens them.

When these people twist and turn and break the law, we shouldn't dance within those laws, but confront them, and defy them. That's called solidarity action. My view is UNITE should be here, rather than me as an individual in a personal basis, they should be here officially. The General Secretary should be here, the officers of the union should be here, ringfencing this building!

Until then it's us. We are strong enough. I believe that and I know that. Solidarity to you all.

**Dave Esterton**  
Lambeth College UCU

Alberto has been put in a terrible situation but should be considered a hero. What he does with his life is spend his time trying to improve other people's lives.

I'm an English teacher, teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages. Alberto came to my college and spoke to my tutor group. Many of our students are cleaners, at and around the minimum wage, nowhere near the London Living Wage. Immediately we got stories from them – people working for cleaning agencies, working for two weeks or a month and not getting paid. Not even not getting the terrible minimum wage: just not getting any of the money.

They had no rights and didn't know what to do about it. I went to a meeting for migrant worker organising and a

speaker said that 'one of the biggest barriers we have is that we can't speak English. We don't know our rights'. So it's very important to my union, especially those who teach English, that we campaign for the right to learn English. I told my class, who remember Alberto, what had happened to him, and they immediately decided to send a message of support to this picket, agreeing entirely that he should be reinstated and all the other workers' demands met by UBS.

People have raised the question of the banks. I'll just give you a little fact. It's now estimated that £850 billion was given to the banks in bailouts. Last year the money the government spent on education was something like £85 billion. In the election there will be the argument that 'we need cuts and the one of the problems is we can't keep affording public services is that there are too many immigrants in this country'.

We are going to have to counter that argument. We must say it is not the immigrants who decided to bail out the banks. It is not immigrants who decided to cut spending on health and education. In fact it is immigrants who are going to bear the worst brunt of any cuts.

## international day of action

19th March will see protests in Zurich, Buenos Aires, New York and Stockholm as well as London and elsewhere in the UK.

The London protest starts at 5pm outside UBS at 100 Liverpool Street.

See [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=321918197556](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=321918197556) for full details

## union blames workers

by Alberto Durango

sacked UBS cleaners' shop steward

Today [March 12th] cleaners had a meeting with management at UBS. The management told workers if they did not accept the changed conditions they would lose their jobs. Some of the workers called José Vallejo, the UNITE regional organiser asking him what to do. Two days previously he had told the workers they shouldn't sign anything and that the company was breaking the law. Yet now he told them to accept the cuts in hours.

The workers felt very upset, betrayed by the union. The Unite cleaners' organiser Wayne Martin gave them the same answer however. So when some of the workers called me and told me what had happened, I phoned Wayne Martin to ask what was going on. He said he was just following instructions from José Vallejo, but then tried to blame me for what is going on inside UBS.

He claimed that the workers' problems were the result of me and José fighting over personal issues and that is why management attacked the workers. The union's strategy for UBS is to say it is my fault, not the bosses' fault.

# why does unite employ ISS at its HQ?

★A number of migrant cleaners employed by cowboy cleaning contractor ISS in the City of London have approached *The Commune*, concerned about the fact that their own union UNITE has its offices cleaned by... ISS.

Well known for terrible conditions and sacking workers who tried to organise on the London Underground and elsewhere, ISS was also complicit in the immigration raid and deportation of SOAS campus cleaners last June.

One such cleaner in the City wrote to UNITE asking why they employ ISS, and received this remarkable response:

Hi Ricardo,

Responding to your above mentioned question I will like to make these few comments. Starting with are you are aware that one can only know the stuff one's enemy is made of only through engagement?

Yes, Unite employs ISS at its headquarters but yet makes sure that ISS does not pay below the LLW [London Living Wage] to its employees at Unites office. So now if Unite has insisted that ISS does not pay below LLW in its building and ISS has accepted then unite can build on that and lobby so that ISS does not pay less LLW in other buildings.

To the campaign J4CC [Justice for Cleaners] itself! Justice for Cleaners does not only target the cleaning companies but also their clients – the buildings/banks. You can therefore imagine how huge the fight or task is. Wages of cleaners are not paid by the cleaning companies but indirectly the clients (the buildings/banks).

It sometimes come to a scenario that the client pay enough to the cleaning company to accommodate for the LLW but the cleaning company sits on it. In the other way round some clients are so stingy that they do not pay the contractors enough to enable them pay up to LLW. This is why in pushing for the LLW in a particular building both the client and the cleaning company are attacked.

In the city and at Canary Wharf some banks are so generous that in their buildings cleaners received more than the LLW. It's all because the cleaning companies of these particular buildings pass on the generosity of their clients to its employees, the cleaners.

But don't forget that banks are independent and some banks are richer than others and will be able to offer more whilst others are rich yet they are not willing to pay even the

LLW. This is why it's difficult to achieve a London wide LLW at ago.

Ricardo, my advice is if there is a building some where that ISS cleans but our colleagues (cleaners) earn less than the LLW then it is the duty of you and me to educate them to get organised and finally put up a fight. But all these could be achieved only through a well educated and properly organised under a Union – Unite.

As an insider, a lay officer and a Branch Secretary of Branch 2007(J4CC) I can boldly say that the Justice for Cleaners Campaign has been a success and it has at least changed the living condition of some cleaners in the city and Canary Wharf. The campaign is not hailed only in the London but in the whole of UK and some parts of the world. But by hailing the success of the campaign does not mean that there have not been hitches, setbacks and failures. In all the success attained outnumbers the failure or setbacks encountered. I hope you will agree with me.

Kwasi Agyemang-Prempeh  
Branch Secretary  
BLE-2007-Unite the Union

# workers' councils: the red mole of revolution

by Sheila Cohen

The red mole may weave unexpected patterns and assume strange disguises; it is digging, digging fast, and moving in roughly the right direction...'

Daniel Singer, *The Road to Gdansk*.

The term 'Workers' Councils' can perhaps stand as a catch-all title for an unpremeditated, quasi-spontaneous, 'ground-up' organisational form reproduced over many periods and across many countries by groups of workers previously unaware of such a structure or of its historical precedents. Its highest form the Soviet, its 'lowest' the simple workplace representatives' committee, this formation recurs time and again in situations of major class struggle and even everyday industrial conflict.

Why do workers always, independently and apparently 'spontaneously', adopt the same mass meetings-based, delegate-generating, committee-constructed form for their most powerful expressions of resistance? The answer is simple, because the form is simple; the form is constructed from the requirements of the situation, not plucked from thin air. Workers in a situation of upsurge are unlikely to look around at a range of possible alternatives: the workers' council structure, at whatever level, immediately serves the necessities of the situation. As one account of the Hungarian revolution puts it: 'the Hungarian workers had instinctively grasped...that they must break completely with traditional organisational forms...' (Anderson 1964, p107).

Fully-fledged workers' councils exist, almost by definition, at times of heightened class struggle, times which generate not only these formations but all the vehicles of class struggle: mass strikes, occupations, sometimes riots. The analysis of this organisational form is therefore almost inseparable from other aspects of such periods and their key associated characteristics: dual power, direct democracy, self-activity from below, unofficial and extra-union forms of worker organisation, solidarity and class unity, and above all heightened class consciousness. In what follows, the historical account will be structured in terms of these key common aspects of the workers' council formation.

Perhaps most suggestively of all, classical comments on revolutionary change such as those of Marx and Lenin on the Paris Commune and Petrograd Soviet point to a crucial dynamic in which this worker-generated organisational form simultaneously challenges the character of the bourgeois state and constitutes itself as a vehicle for its transformation. In this sense a fusion between organisational form and political transition can also be glimpsed within the workers' council formation; an aspect of revolutionary *praxis* which perhaps overtakes what critics of Marx have denounced as a mechanistic distinction between base and superstructure.

This contribution will provide historical examples throughout capitalism to illustrate the constant regeneration of the highly specific workers' council-based organisational form, from 1840s Chartism to 21st century Argentina. At the same time it is recognised that the relevance of the workers' council 'model' to contemporary political and economic circumstances is beyond doubt. This can be summarised in two ways. Firstly, the twin factors of resurgence and unpredictability evident in the history of workers' councils are an indication that such formations can recur even in the apparently incongruous context of 21st-century neo-liberalism; and secondly, the power, poetry and inspiration emerging from these fundamentally working-class organisations stand as a reminder to the left of the continued relevance of class.

*'Each delegate to be at all times revocable...'*

Perhaps the most crucial feature of the workers' council formation is its inherent espousal of *direct democracy* exhibited in mass meetings, delegate structures, and accountable and revocable 'local leaders' (Fosh and Cohen 1990). Such characteristics are found in some of the earliest working-class upsurges under capitalism, such as Chartism, workers' fight for the vote in 1830s and 1840s Britain. Here a 'sizeable network of local leaders developed with astonishing rapidity...' (Charlton 1997, p23). This rank and file leadership came into its own during the historic General Strike of 1842 in a series of delegate conferences which reflected a still earlier tradition of 'cross-trade conferences' held as long ago as 1810.



*the soviets of 1917 represented the height of participatory workers' democracy, in stark contrast to the bureaucratic state which would later assume their name*

The same direct, participative forms of democracy recur throughout the series of struggles in the 19th, 20th and even 21st century in which workers' council formations are generated in the course of often extremely rapid upsurges of rank-and-file resistance. In the US Great Upheaval of the late 1870s, railroad workers embarking on mass strikes against wage cuts 'chose...delegates to a joint grievance committee, ignoring the leadership of their national unions' (Brecher 1997, p17). Within days, this form of organisation had spread to embrace a 'committee of safety' in Toledo, Ohio, 'composed of one member from every trade represented in the movement'; as the strike sped on to St Louis, railroad workers at a strike meeting 'set up a committee of one man from each railroad, and occupied the Relay Depot as their headquarters' (p32).

Such forms were reproduced almost identically almost 20 years later in a series of massive battles with railroad companies during the 1890s; workers on strike against Pullman in 1894 'held open meetings daily...a central strike committee with representatives of each local union directed the strike' (p99). While the newly-launched American Railway Union, led by Eugene Debs, lent strong support, '[o]perational control... rested in the strike committees that sprang up within each body of strikers'. In Debs' words, 'The committees came from all yards and from all roads to confer with us...and we would authorize that committee to act for that yard or that road...' (pp101-2). As shown below, such endorsement by established unions is rare; even Debs, not yet an explicit socialist, ultimately checked the 'mass direct action' in the Pullman strike for fear of 'insurrection' (Brecher 1997, p114).

While the 19th-century strike waves documented by Brecher are thrilling in their quasi-insurrectionary character, workers' struggles during the First World War period posed a far more alarming level of revolutionary potential to an nervous ruling class. Apart from the Russian soviets, documented further below, the heart of direct democracy and the 'workers' council movement' was to be found in Germany, where the potential for a revolution to build on and support the Soviet example was as strong as its failure was tragic. One account written by a participant in the events (Appel 2008) documents how, in November 1918, mutinying sailors 'elected delegates who, ship by ship, formed a Council' while 'during the war similar organisations had made their appearance in the factories. They were formed in the course of strikes, by elected representatives.' Appel comments that 'The independent activity of the workers and soldiers adopted the organisational form of councils as a matter of expediency; these were the new forms of class organisation.' While factory councils, according to this ac-

count, were seen by the KPD (the early German Communist Party) as 'a mere form of organisation, nothing more, subject to directives from outside', the workers saw it as 'a vastly different matter – a means of control from the bottom up' (p4).

The Italian factory councils movement, particularly in its historic flowering in the Turin of 1920, again unmistakably raised the possibility, though not actuality, of workers' power. Such movements, based in the workplace 'internal commissions' originally nurtured by the official union federation FIOM but taken over by insurgent workers, again embodied patterns of direct democracy. In the words of one participant in the first-ever factory council, set up in August 1919: 'The key characteristic of the councils was the ability of the rank and file to recall any delegate immediately.' By October 1919 the factory councils movement was able to call a conference of delegates from thirty factories representing 50,000 workers (Mason 2007, pp246-7). As Gramsci noted just before the Turin events, 'Trapped in the pincers of capitalist conflicts...the masses break away from the forms of bourgeois democracy...' (Williams 1975, p163).

Even in relatively 'moderate' Britain, soldiers' mutinies in 1919 over delayed demobilisation displayed identical features of direct democracy. One of the most highly organised mutinies took place in Calais, where 'strike committees [were] functioning in all the camps...A soldiers' council was elected, called the "Calais Area Soldiers' and Sailors' Association", with four or more delegates from the larger camps and two each from the smaller.' Government officials warned the Prime Minister that he 'should not confer with soldiers' delegates...The soldiers' delegation bore a dangerous resemblance to a *Soviet*' (quoted in Rosenberg 1987, p12, emphasis in original). In fact, according to "alarmist" reports by Bonar Law, 'a certain section of the workers [was] only too ready and eager...to inveigle the soldiers into an alliance with themselves, on the lines of the Soviet Committees' (p16).

Parallel structures of direct democracy can also be detected in the various worker upsurges of Eastern Europe during the post- Second World War period. Here, a number of moving accounts of the 1956 confrontation in Hungary, as well as those in Czechoslovakia, Poland etc, provide rich examples of such grass-roots democracy as part of the workers' council formation.

Writing of the outbreak of workers' council organisation during the Hungarian revolution, Nagy (2006) documents how the council delegates 'were merely those with the responsibility of carrying out the will of the working class'. For this writer, workers' councils 'arose quite naturally out of direct









# more hunger strikes at yarl's wood

by Victoria Thompson

Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre was opened in 2001 and is the main detention centre for families and children. Run by a private firm, Serco Group plc who also manufacture nuclear weaponry, it has 405 bed spaces, and at any time scores of young children are detained within the grey prison walls. Yarl's Wood has courted controversy since its opening, with hunger strikes, riots and even suicide attempts commonplace amongst the prisoners.

Several investigations into the detention centre have concluded that the prison is "not safe" on a basic health and safety level, as well as the site of sexual and racist intimidation and violence.

Families with young children and heavily pregnant women often have to wait for hours in vans before they are taken into the prison and many other women are separated from their new born babies to be placed in detention.

The first hunger strikes began just a month after Yarl's Wood opened, with five Roma women refusing to eat in protest at the conditions they were being held in. By January, an ethnic Albanian fleeing Kosovo had been on hunger strike for thirty days, prompting local Bedfordshire residents to hold a series of candlelit vigils in support of his plight.

Just a year later in 2002, damage costing over £30 million was caused after a serious fire destroyed much of the building. The fire was started by angry inmates after a 55 year old woman who had been seeking medical treatment for three days was forced into handcuffs for the journey to the hospital.

The prison's managers had previously ignored warnings from the Fire Brigade that a sprinkler system would be necessary, instead choosing to jeopardise the lives of the hundreds of men, women and children held prisoner there. A sprinkler system was not installed as part of the refurbishment, even though five immigrants had been injured in the fire.

The repugnant treatment of asylum seekers in Britain is best highlighted by the case of Manuel Bravo, an Angolan asylum seeker who hanged himself in front of his thirteen year old son in Yarl's Wood in 2005. Bravo, who took his life on his 35th birthday, was first contacted by Immigration Service officials on a Tuesday. On Wednesday, he was seized by police and taken to Yarl's Wood. He was to be deported on the Thursday, even though his parents had been murdered by the Angolan regime, and both he and his wife had previously been imprisoned. Bravo's solicitors took his money, but refused to represent him. Desperate for his son to stay in Britain and continue his high school education, Bravo's suicide was a last desperate act of parental love, the only way to ensure that his child at least could live



*Yarl's Wood is a prison for immigrant women and children in Bedfordshire. On 21st February activists got past the security barriers to show solidarity and establish contact with hunger strikers*

their common dream of a life free from persecution in Britain.

A 2006 investigation into Yarl's Wood by Legal Action for Women (LAW) found that 70% of the women detainees were rape victims, 57% had no legal representation and over half had been detained over 3 months. LAW produced a self-help guide for the women, but it was confiscated by the prison's guards.

Three years later, an investigation into the conditions experienced by the child detainees showed that the incarcerated children are handled violently and frequently left at risk of serious harm. In one instance, a young autistic boy did not have sufficient food for a period lasting several days. Some families report being given formula milk for their children that is past its sell by date.

Looking at this catalogue of injustice, it is not wonder that hunger strikes – sometimes with over 100 women refusing food at any time – are still continuing.

Last month, a number of women on hunger strike were attacked by guards with riot shields. One woman who was bleeding severely called an ambulance, but the paramedics were not allowed to enter the prison. Around 70 women (including one who had been imprisoned for fifteen months) took part in this hunger strike, angry at the length and conditions of their detainment, the lack of legal aid offered to

them and their separation from their children. The hunger strikers were locked away from the other prisoners in an airless corridor. Sadly, the plight of these women barely made the news, forcing activists outside of the prisons to undertake solidarity fasts in an attempt to garner more publicity. In Manchester, I was one of scores of activists who fasted with this aim in mind.

Yarl's Wood and the other "detention centres" scattered across the UK are merely prisons where the incarcerated have committed no crime.

We should not consent to call them by their euphemisms, but instead make clear at every turn that they are indeed prisons – prisons in which over 2,000 children are detained every year. For those whose asylum claims are subsequently refused, Yarl's Wood is the last stop before they are deported to countries where they face rape, torture, imprisonment and murder. For those who find their claims accepted, there is no recompense for the time they and their children spent behind bars.

Communists must be unequivocal in raising the demand for an immediate end to this indefinite detention of men, women and children fleeing persecution. We must oppose the forced deportations of those seeking asylum and the inhumane, degrading treatment of some of country's most vulnerable people.

# migrant workers across italy strike as one

★ On 1st March tens of thousands of migrant workers across Italy went on strike on the 'Day Without Us'. The day of action highlighted the conditions of the 4.5 million-strong immigrant population as well as the recent upsurge in state-backed racism. This was the latest sign of defiance by Italian migrants, after the recent 2,000-strong riot in Rosarno. A member of Rifondazione Comunista comments on its significance.

by Andrea Strippoli

From the 2006 undocumented workers' strike in the USA to the European mobilizations of recent years, immigrants have challenged forms of work and production and social and economic policies that do not take proper account of the transformations of modern society.

We believe that the tip of the iceberg of these changes – in economic, political, cultural and social life – is represented by the experience of foreign nationals here in Italy.

Their lives starkly highlight the contradictions in the formal and informal economy, the production of goods and distribution of information, repressive "security" policies and humanitarian intervention.

For immigrants, ordinary legislation gradually gives way to 'special measures', a constant series of attacks.

The important role immigrants play in Europe is an inescapable fact of life, as is their presence here. But still many people do not want to accept the pluralism of Italian



society. In spite of so much that has happened, some still fail to see that the cities of Italy are now a melting pot of languages, colours, cultures and lifestyles. But we will not go back: not to see this is ridiculous!

Precisely for this reason, experiments attacking immigrants are the litmus test of socially repressive and exclusionary policies that affect us all. They started with foreigners because they were considered weak.

But how can we understand this anti-immigration ruling party as anything other than an 'emergency powers' government, when it has gone so far as to make the use of the Italian army against its own civilian population something prosaic and everyday (for example the soldiers patrolling the streets of the capital, along with their management of the Aquila earthquake and the rubbish crisis in Naples)?

It seems increasingly difficult to think that absence from work, the strike, could serve to transform the society in which we live. In times of economic crisis and unemployment it may seem difficult to speak of migrants' social and economic rights without exposing an alleged war between the poor.

But the riots in Rosarno (like those of Castel Volturno, or the large demonstration on 17th October in Rome, or the forms of social self-organization that led to the occupation of disused stables in Bari to compensate and counteract the shortage of social policies) show the leading role immigrants themselves play in the struggle to claim new dignity and new rights for all.

# the cuts consensus and the general election

by Dave Spencer

The 2010 general election will be a watershed for the politics of the British left. Business as usual will not be an option because of the scale of the attacks on the working class that are coming. No matter which party wins the election or even if there is a hung parliament, it is clear that the ruling class has decided to make the working class pay for the economic crisis and the bailing out of the banks. The left groups have failed over 14 years to form a united alternative to New Labour. If they use the same methods and politics as in the past, they cannot possibly be up to the tasks ahead.

Already there is talk among normally rational people in the broadsheets of "a bloodbath in the public finances" with 350,000 public sector jobs to go in the next 5 years. This is John Philpott of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in *The Times*: "Job security and relatively generous pay and pensions are things of the past," he concludes. An NHS Confederation Report mentioned in *The Guardian* declares that there will be at least £10 billion cuts in the NHS over three years after 2011. According to a BBC Today programme, local authorities are estimating cuts in budgets of at least 20%. These are figures it is difficult to get your head round. They are on a scale qualitatively different from anything seen over the last 60 years. And this is gentle speculation before the general election.

All departmental discussions in the public sector at all levels about plans for the future of public services have this cloud hanging over them.

In early March I was at a conference discussing the alleviation of poverty in the West Midlands. The government spokesperson gave an upbeat list of achievements so far and of course more needs to be done. I pointed out the apparent contradiction between this past success story and the government's plans to drastically cut future public services. The Chair commented, "I suppose somebody had to mention the elephant in the room!" The point is that facts have to be faced and some new thinking is required -- and it will be done whether the left is present or not.

The example of Canada is being used in meetings by Sir Gus McDonnell the senior civil servant, because Canada cut its public expenditure by 20% over 4 years in the 1990s to overcome a recession. This is classic, neo-liberal thinking in the "Washington Consensus" mould. The WC was a series of 10 policy points recommended by John Williamson



*'labour, tory, same old story'... so why is there no left to speak of?*

in 1989 as guidelines for the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and the US Treasury.

They have been used consistently as a basis for lending money to countries in economic trouble. Fundamentally they insist on a) financial austerity, loosening the power of the state and cutting public expenditure and taxes b) privatisation of all existing public enterprises and contracting out as many public services as possible, and c) liberalising market forces by removing trade barriers, all laws and regulations which get in the way of employers and introducing flexible labour laws to drive down wages and conditions.

The "Washington Consensus" was the basis of increased globalisation since the 1990s. Hereby hangs the snag. It may have worked in one state Canada in the 1990s but what we have now is a global recession and it is the global ruling class that is determined to make the international working class pay. Already the results of that are being shown in Greece.

What about the working class and Marxism? There is no united left as an alternative to New Labour at this general election. In effect the working class have no voice. The left groups have had 14 years to get it together in times of two unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and an economic

recession. It is not a question of them making an honest attempt which has failed and from which lessons have been learned. Rather it is a history of bureaucratic mismanagement and sectarian manoeuvring with every sign that these methods will continue.

There is of course a political basis to their failure. Simply put, it is top-downism, vanguardism, substitutionism where an elite "leadership" makes the decisions and the rest of us are supposed to follow. Think of the No2EU fiasco and its recent manifestation TUSC. These electoral conveniences were cobbled together in a back room by a bunch of bureaucrats from the National Committees of various organisations at the last minute before an election.

There was no attempt to create a mass organisation over a period of time that could democratically decide on policy and candidates and activate large sections of the population. It is a call from above to the faithful below. This is old left thinking of the worst kind, reminiscent of the methods of Stalinism and trade union bureaucracy.

Linked to these politics of elitism is state-ism where socialism means taking over the state and nationalising everything from the top down. There is no concept of workers' control or democratic functioning in the workplace or harnessing the creative ideas of workers themselves. The left groups are also characterised by an undemocratic internal life of their own that makes the Labour Party look enlightened. Their politics and organisational methods have made it impossible for them to build a united front to face New Labour over 14 years. They feel the need to either control or destroy any campaign or organisation they are involved in. How will it be possible for them to join any fight-back against the coming attacks without screwing it up again?

In any campaigns against job losses and cuts, and there will be many of these, democratic functioning and accountability have to be the rule. The voice of the working class must be heard. We should resist attempts by the left groups to dominate or control. Their record speaks for itself.

The fight-back will be a long process and within that process we should call for the self-activity and self-education of the working class to demand workers' control within their workplaces and for communities to take their own areas under control. Communism must be built from below democratically. We need experts in the practice and theory of the various public services as well as in industry to come together to decide on policies and actions which will lead to the building of communism from below.

# should communists stand for parliament?

by Mark Harrison

The general election is only weeks away and the Trotskyist newspapers are once again calling for us to "vote Labour without illusions", unless we can vote for a Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition candidate. TUSC was effectively borne out of the No2EU left-nationalist alliance between the Socialist Party (England and Wales) and the Communist Party of Britain, although this time round without participation from the soft-Stalinists.

Despite the fact that comrades on the ground may believe that this is a step towards 'left unity' and perhaps even the shell from which a new political party akin to the French New Anticapitalist Party could arise, nothing of the sort will happen. Both the CPGB and Workers' Power, who wanted to join, have been excluded and little in the way of 'unity' shall last after the elections.

But lacking from the debate thus far is whether it is tactically correct for communists to stand in elections to bourgeois parliament. When confronted with this question, there is little doubt that Trotskyists will point us no farther than the texts of Lenin, who allegedly put 'infantile' types such as Sylvia Pankhurst in their place with his infamous critique of the left wing members of the world communist movement.

The Bolsheviks advocated a policy of 'revolutionary parliamentarianism', whereby communists would stand with a full communist manifesto and use the election period to agitate for communist ideas. However, the policies of TUSC are left-Labourism. This should come as no surprise, as those who are sponsoring the coalition (trade union bureaucrats, ex-Labour entrists and the Walsall Democratic Labour Party) want to create a new, 'old Labour' party. This is plainly also seen in SPEW's Campaign for a New Workers' Party.



*william morris recommended that this building be used to store dung*

It demonstrates the staleness of ideas within the British left that the principle of standing for parliament is never questioned. To do so, let us first examine the value of elections from a propaganda point of view: there is no good reason as to why the working class should be more susceptible to communist propaganda during a general election period than at any other time, an orator on Speaker's Corner or a revolutionary pamphlet contains the same ideas no matter what the bourgeoisie are doing in Parliament.

Moreover, once in parliament if a communist MP is to make a speech how would it be communicated to the working

class? Most workers do not read the stuffy Parliamentary record Hansard, and the bourgeois media would surely either ignore or misrepresent their remarks. The way for communists to win support is to demonstrate our courage and sincerity during workers' struggles, in the workplace: *outside* of parliament.

Unlike Tsarist Russia, most people in Britain believe that parliament is class neutral and is a democratic institution. By calling on workers to the ballot box one can only reinforce this prejudice: we should not attempt to prove a method is obsolete by taking part in it.

Moreover, voting for another to represent you can only reinforce the idea that the way to improve your position is to leave the job to another who will fight for socialism on your behalf. An artificial division is created between 'leaders' in Westminster and their followers, when what we need to realise that it is only workers ourselves who can create socialism by our own self-organisation.

And once communists formed a parliamentary group, would they not be tempted to join with the social-democrats in supporting 'progressive' policies? Parliament is the executive of capitalism or, "The debating chamber of the master class" which is why the few MPs who represented the Communist Party *did not* use parliament to agitate for communism but rather became reformists themselves. For example, Willie Gallacher, once an anti-parliamentarian himself, who during an exchange with Lenin remarked that he would be incorruptible by parliament.

Workers worldwide need to understand that we ourselves hold the power to change the world: communism will come about not through Parliament, but our own organisation, workers' councils. These would operate on a system of democratically elected and instantly recallable delegates. We need not corrupt our best comrades or misguide anyone as to the source of communism.

# twenty years after the poll tax

by Allan Armstrong

It is twenty years since Thatcher's Tory government tried to impose the Poll Tax upon the people of England and Wales. The Poll Tax had been introduced a year earlier in Scotland as a test run for the abolition of Domestic Rates throughout Britain. (Even the Tories had more sense than to try to introduce the Poll Tax in Northern Ireland in the context of the ongoing Republican resistance there!)

Officially termed the Community Charge, the Poll Tax amounted to a flat rate tax that individuals had to pay regardless of their income. Previously, local authorities raised revenues through the Rates, which related to the value of people's property. This meant it was a redistributive tax. However, under the Poll Tax, a cleaner living in a one bedroom flat was to pay the same as the lord living in a stately home. The queen didn't have to pay a penny.

What gave the Tories the confidence to test out the Poll Tax in Scotland, where they enjoyed so little support, and to extend it to England and Wales? Over the previous few years, the 'Iron Lady' had been able to ride rough shod over once powerful left-wing institutions – Labour controlled local authorities including those of Edinburgh District Council, Lothian Region and Greater London Council. Industrial action, undertaken by trade unions to defend their members' pay, conditions and jobs, culminated in the Great Miners' Strike in 1984. Although this heroic struggle involved thousands of miners and tens of thousands of supporters, Arthur Scargill always looked to the Labour Party and the TUC to deliver the knock-out blow. The miners waited in vain and the NUM went down to defeat in 1985.

The Tories now felt invincible. Seeing no further than the official bodies of the Labour Movement, they felt they could take on the whole of the working class without any fear of concerted opposition. Just to rub it in, they first chose Scotland, which Labour had long considered its own private fiefdom. The Tories, though, had the measure of the official opposition.

To begin with, the Labour Party and the Scottish TUC promoted the 'Axe the Tax' campaign and organised the first marches. However, a Scottish Labour Party Special Conference, held in March 1988 in Glasgow, refused to back non-payment. This marked the end of official Labour opposition. However, what the Tories hadn't calculated for was the possibility of our class organising independently of the official movement. And this is exactly what happened.

Workers, householders, pensioners, students and others, along with political activists, got together in their communities to create Anti-Poll Tax groups. These joined together in various regional groups, and the Scottish and the All-Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federations. They were committed to a non-payment campaign, and involved themselves in direct action against sheriff officers, bailiffs and others trying to enforce the Poll Tax. In many areas this also brought them into conflict with Labour councils, which became the Tories' principal agent on the ground enforcing the hated tax.

What soon became clear was that the local Anti-Poll Tax groups, with their regularly weekly or fortnightly meetings, and their usually monthly regional meetings, formed a far more extensive and better-supported network than the Labour Party with its ward, district and regional meetings. The political basis of a new independent political movement was there for any serious socialist who was prepared to see what was before their eyes.

Furthermore, whilst the SNP leadership opportunistically took advantage of the mass movement to win a stunning by-election victory in Glasgow Govan on 10th November 1988 (with a 38% swing), their vision was confined to making further electoral gains in Scotland. The regional and Scottish Anti-Poll Tax Federations though saw the necessity of spreading the action to England and Wales, on the basis of internationalism from below. Speakers were sent south.

The levels of non-registration and non-payment in Scotland, coupled to the ever-widening 'no-go' areas for sheriff officers (and Labour Party canvassers!) brought about levels of civil resistance not seen since the mass Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland. However, it was the knock out blow, delivered in the very heartland of the UK state by the riot in Trafalgar Square on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1990, which prompted the ruling class to ditch both Thatcher and the Poll Tax. This was truly a stunning victory for independent class action. So what did the left learn from this?

In the 1980s, the SWP was locked into its own leftist version of Labour's 'New Realism', called the 'Downturn Theory'. Therefore, once the Labour Party and the TUC backed down over the Poll Tax, the SWP thought the game was up. It rejected non-payment as a strategy, and even had some members paying up. One year later, its leader Tony Cliff heard a near-riot down the road from his home in Hackney.



*non-payment outflanked labour and the tuc*

The resistance had never gone away – indeed it had grown from strength to strength. But by now it was too late for the SWP. They have remained committed to making sterile demands on Labour and trade union officialdom, coupled with their attempts to promote bureaucratic party-front organisations, as sources for recruits.

The other major British left organisation, Militant, after the bruising experience of trying to takeover the Labour Party in Liverpool, began to question its previous strategy. It wasn't easy for them. A Militant member-sponsored motion to the East of Scotland Anti-Poll Tax Federation called for it to be a condition of membership that you supported the Labour Party! Even the Militant leadership opposed this. Nevertheless, when local groups agreed to put forward Keith Simpson, the recent

Musselburgh Labour councillor and Militant member, as an independent Anti-Poll Tax candidate in 1990, both Militant and the SWP opposed them. The local groups went ahead nevertheless, and Keith won over 20% of the vote. Scottish Militant eventually learned some lessons, and put forward candidates in Glasgow and Strathclyde in 1992, winning four District and one Regional seat.

Following this, in the process of attempting to make their break with the Labour Party, Militant has become divided between those in the Socialist Party who want to create a new Labour Party with the support of Broad Left trade union officials, and those in the former International Socialist Movement in Scotland, who wanted to develop a wider, more open and democratic socialist alliance. The highpoint of this strategy was the Scottish Socialist Party's winning six MSPs in the devolved Holyrood parliament in 2003. Virtually the whole of the left in Scotland (including even Militant and the SWP) were united in the one party, and the opposition to the Iraq war was at its peak.

Since then, the left, including the SSP, throughout the UK has been in retreat (aided by the antics of the SP/IS and the SWP, which have also pursued their ingrained sectarianism in the Socialist Alliance and Respect). ISM has dissolved itself and there is no longer any shared strategy amongst ex-members about how to rebuild principled socialist unity.

However, the success of the Anti-Poll Tax campaign highlights the necessity to build independent organisations for our class. Sometimes this will mean continued work in sections of the official movement – there were Labour Party and trade union branches, which supported the Anti-Poll Tax Federations. However, in such cases, the main job is still to try and win their memberships over to independent class politics.

Furthermore, there is another vital lesson for us today. Class struggle in the late 1980s was at a low ebb after the defeat of left Labour-led councils and, in particular, of the miners. Nobody anticipated the success of the Anti-Poll Tax struggle. Today, in the face of massive attacks in the aftermath of the so-called 'Credit Crunch', many workers still feel cowed. However, they also feel very angry.

The massive rejection of the Social Democratic/Left Green Alliance government's banker bailout in the referendum in Iceland, and the major strikes and confrontations between workers and the Greek Socialist government and state forces, show how quickly the mood can change. Trade union leaders, however, only want to renegotiate the draconian cuts, not to oppose them on principle. Success means reviving independent class organisation and building internationalism from below on an even wider basis.

★A member of the RCN, Allan is former Chair of Lothians Anti-Poll Tax Federation and co-Chair of first Scottish Anti-Poll Tax Federation Conference

## the commune's meetings around britain

★London: The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital. We have our own organising meetings in London as well as 'uncaptive minds' forums on the themes of the general election.

The next meeting is a discussion on immigration, with particular reference to deportations, attacks on cleaners in the City and the recent national strike in Italy. From 7pm on Monday 22nd 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 next such meeting, on "State-socialism and its critics" will be held from 6pm on Sunday 28th March 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 "Gender inequality in society and in our movement". From 7pm on Wednesday 17th March at The Rutland Arms, 86 Brown Street, Sheffield S1 2BS. See the advert on our website for suggested reading.

★North-West: the next Manchester Class Struggle Forum is a discussion on trade unionism: 7pm on Thursday 1st April at Friends Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS. For details contact Mark on 07976 386737.

★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](http://www.lacomuna.co.uk)

[thecommune.co.uk](http://thecommune.co.uk)  
[uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com)

# the meaning of 'militancy' today

by Nathan Coombs

The word militancy's usage generally refers to non-state military groups pursuing an ideological programme. In the way in which the term is deployed in the media, it is thus used as an ambiguous half way house between more legitimate terms such as, say, activist group, and the more loaded term extremists, or terrorists.

But that said, what I want to do is to examine the aspects of militancy which are not necessarily based on violence, even if they do not preclude it. Let us use an accessible example, during the RMT-led tube strikes in 2009 it was a consist motif in the press to label the union, and particularly its leader, Bob Crow, as militant. Obviously this did not imply that they were using coercive violence to achieve their means – not even at the picket lines where historically there is usually tension between strikers and strike breakers. At the same time, the militant aspect cannot be reduced solely to action, because that also seems to miss what is unique about it. Here I think we need to consider the modality and the ends of the action to understand whether or not it can be considered militant.

First of all, we have to primarily see militant action as an act of self-interested self-assertion. It transcends mere bargaining over pay and conditions, which is the mainstay of the union bureaucracy and management, and involves a fight for something more – and I would say that something more is the balance of power itself. Whilst the balance of power is always a factor in union negotiations, or even actions when they break down, the action becomes militant precisely when power itself comes into dispute.

This appears to be what is being missed in discussion regarding the BA dispute also: the fact that what is at stake cannot be reduced down to a mere tussle over pay and jobs, but the question of who and how those decisions are made: the fact that union members see themselves as having a stake in the company and not just as disposable units of labour. So my first thesis is that militancy fundamentally privileges power. Militant action fights *for* power, not simply through it. Which is also why it is frequently locked in antagonism with authority – to stay with the union theme, think the miners strike and the way tens of thousands of police were directed against them, the way Thatcher defined them as 'the enemy within', and so forth.

A militant action does not seek to accommodate itself within the prevailing consensus, but rupture the consensus itself. If successful it changes the objective situation through its action, and defines the very terms of discourse which follow from it. Alain Badiou's idea of a militant truth procedure seems right on this point. And remembering some comments by Slavoj Žižek, thinkers such as Freud and Marx can also be considered militant, in that they subtracted their thought from all consensus, and their followers (Freudians and Marxists) concretised these through discourses which were held to no other authority except the words of Marx or Freud themselves.

So my second thesis is that a militant action has to not only fight for power, but to equally at least aim to change the objective situation and terms of discourse. In a minimal interpretation of this second thesis, it seems that al-Qaeda have been remarkably successful in changing the entire global situation: from the way we travel, to the erosion of privacy, drawing the United States into ongoing conflict in the Middle East, and so on. Whether or not their fight for power is successful – it generally seems to be fought indirectly through proxy in any case – they obviously demonstrate at least some of the traits of militancy.

## 2 Is transnational militancy possible?

To begin to answer this question I think we should taking Frederic Jameson's demand to 'always historicize' as our first point of departure. Even twenty years ago we might have been talking about internationalist militancy, but with the defeat of the global revolutionary movement – roughly coinciding with the end of the Cold War, although perhaps as far back as the late 1970s – militant Islam has come to define the terms we use. And with these national, internationalist movements defeated the theoretical spectrum has tried to recreate the space for thinking a global movement in the transnational terms rather than international terms – take Hardt and Negri's work for one example.

Yet given the way I present what militancy is, there seems to be a paradox at the heart of the idea of transnational militancy. Because if militancy is the fight *for* power, what then is the objective of transnational militancy? That is, where is the transnational power it could wrestle with? The global justice movement, and experiments such as the

World Social Forum, obviously fail to count as a militant movement not simply because they involve no taking up of arms, but moreover because it is not altogether obvious who they are fighting against and on what level. What power can they fight for? Providing an alternative space to institutions such as the WTO, IMF etc. is not the same as taking power from those institutions, which would have to involve withdrawal of national governments from these institutions. Since at the national level this is where the decision of withdrawal would foment the most antagonisms (between say political-financial elites and the poor majority), it is here that the action would take on its militant modality. If the movement coordinated itself with movements in other countries, this would be an internationalist movement, not a transnational one.

This analysis I think points to the fact that *transnational militancy, as things stand today, is a contradiction in terms*. Certain transnational movements can seek to shift the consensus, but this is a long way from the self-interested, self-assertion for power which I associate with militancy.



*the december 2008 uprising in greece was tactically radical but also lacked specific objectives*

## 3 Militant organizational forms?

Today horizontal organizational forms are thought of as the future – this is aligned to a number of factors which I want to list here. First, is the anti-statist, anti-authoritarian imaginary which now seems to dominates radical politics, which frames its thought generally within the remit of negative freedoms. This is combined, second, with the sense that technology – the internet, blogs, peer to peer networks, etc. – are democratising both the flows of information and how movements and projects are constructed. And finally, both these two factors assist and are reciprocal with the idea of the transnational movement, which cuts across borders and identities. And as supposed transnational militants, al-Qaeda epitomize this: with their emphasis on self-sufficient and self-organizing cells linked through generally amorphous jihadist websites and media sharing resources.

However, the preceding discussion on how al-Qaeda do not seek to affect change by claiming power points to the problem of the network as a militant model. Let us take the Iranian 'green movement' – itself with some level transnationality behind it. It has been praised for making use of all these democratic, horizontal internet technologies to organise its protests without a clear central node determining all its actions.

But this is not strictly true; there is a leadership behind the greens – presidential candidates Mousavi and Karroubi; with the dealmaker Rafsanjani making moves in the background. These are all, of course, hardcore proponents of the Islamic Republic, who have had in one way or the other their part to play in the suppression of the very horizontal pluralities in the country about which the movement is now praised. So it seems that these networks ultimately default to falling in behind establishment figures in a tacit interplay between activist and regime insider.

There is thus a large gap opening up between the imaginary of the type of politics many people want to engage with in this new century – horizontal, networked, multitudinous – and their ability to effectively engage with effective power. Part and parcel of this process seems to be an ever-growing scepticism and disengagement from the democratic processes of national politics, whilst the totally undemocratic and unaccountable bodies such as the United Nations and World Health Organization become held up as the authoritative bodies to which national governments are held.

## 4. Militant demands?

To begin, I want to draw your attention to one of the more interesting analyses of the Greek December uprising

2008/09: the fact that despite the protesting, riots, and running street battles with the police there was little effort to attempt to articulate anything like a set of demands. At the same time, neither was there any attempt to take the state and seize power in the revolutionary sense. It was almost like a replay of May 1968, except this time failure was pre-ordained from the start.

There was nothing inevitable about this – immigrants were protesting, the unions were threatening to hold a general strike, and too late, after typical institutional communist party procrastination, the Greek Communist Party (KKE) came out in support of the movement. At the very least there was a large potential leverage on the state, but instead nothing more than a diffuse dissatisfaction was exhibited.

Students and young people occupied public buildings and universities, but held them for only a short time. In any normal political analysis it would be hard to read the uprising as anything other than simply a momentary emancipatory opening (following Fanon, I don't think we should deny the proximity of a certain destructive violence to emancipatory movements) leading into something akin to political disaster – a sharp cultural swing to the right wing, the siege of the semi-autonomous Exarchia district of Athens, and the election of a principleless centre-left political dynasty. In terms of concrete results – whether redressing police brutality, or measures to change the situation of the 700 Euro generation – the uprising has basically nothing to show for its efforts.

Of course, it would be easy to inscribe this into an analysis of the lack of realism inherent to anarchism (the 'vanguard' of the movement were generally the more militant types from Greece's multifarious anarchist collectives) but perhaps there is a more general problematic here? In any case, it was not long before governments in Western Europe were fretting about a repeat of the uprising. In France this translated into the witchhunt against the tiny anarchist collective based in rural town of Tarnac, whose text *The Coming Insurrection*, was supposed to herald and provoke a return to autonomist Baader-Meinhof style violence on the continent. In the UK ahead of the G20 the police seemed to be actively seeking to provoke some sort of street clashes, with talk of the 'summer of rage' and telling protesters to 'bring it on!'

Needless to say, the December uprising remained essentially a Greek phenomenon grounded in the particularities of their political situation: decades of network building amongst anarchist networks, a large section of the population subscribed to what would in the UK be considered 'old fashioned' ideological paradigms, and so on. Yet considering the uprising somewhat inevitably failed to spread, it is surprising that various autonomist communist and anarchist movements have found inspiration in the events. For instance, the text of the burgeoning Occupy California movement in California, *The Communiqué from an Absent Future*, endorses this strategy of rejecting demands as the only way to instigate a full scale, longer lasting insurrectionary movement against the state and capitalism.

In the large student occupation movement in Austria there is not quite the same absolutism in regard to making demands, and interestingly in an interview I recently conducted with one of the activists they admitted that they are beginning to see the limitations of making utopian demands. Obviously this could go either way – in the direction of making the kind of horse trading compromise with the establishment indicative of most single issue campaigns, or the far more risky, and potentially pointless, absolute rejection of all demands by the Occupy California movement.

From this analysis I think we return to the contours of the very public spat between Slavoj Žižek and Simon Critchley. Slavoj gave a very critical review of Critchley's book *Infinitely Demanding*; foremost for its advocacy of making infinite demands upon the state – demands which the state cannot fulfil. In this Slavoj sees an endemic cynicism he associates with contemporary 'radical' movements, where the militant is locked in a tacit relationship with the establishment. Against this he advocates making "concrete demands" that the establishment is given no choice but to fulfil; and I think his recent wading into the healthcare debate in the United States shows the extent to which this streak of realism (in the absence of a revolutionary Leninist party) determines his rejection of idealistic autonomist movements.

But the elephant in the room in this debate is surely this growing posture of making no demands – a purely nihilistic resistance and ground holding, which seems to characterise many radical movements today.

# why don't we side with the humans in *avatar*?

by Sam Parsa

Recently director James Cameron returned after 12 years of absence since his *Titanic* (1997) to make *Avatar*. Costing somewhere between \$200 to 300 million to make and returning a profit of over \$1 billion, *Avatar* is a sci-fi film about a hired crew of humans who take over a planet called Pandora in 2154 in order to exploit its resources – mainly a substance called unobtainium.

Predictably, the large company of soldiers (and ex-Marines) are equipped with huge battleships and robot-soldiers. These end up being very hostile to the Na'vi, the native humanoid species, who are very traditional with their own strong cultural and religious traditions. As expected and as commented by many, the storyline resembles the invasion of Iraq. However apart from the predictable romance between the native girl and the heroic white man, the story has a little twist: some of the scientists decide to defect to the Na'vi side, organise them, fight back with the humans and even win the battle.

Žižek, the popular Marxist philosopher, has already written a necessary critique of Cameron's superficial "Hollywood Marxism" and the predictable idealist, and patronisingly racist elements of this film, published in the *New Statesman* of 4th March.

However another interesting dimension of this film arises during the latter parts, during the fight against the human crew. Curiously, during this part the audience find themselves on the side with the Na'vis, almost intuitively, after being moved by the courage of the defectors instead of the humans who are all either killed or captured.

Some baffling questions that arise are (a) Why is it that we find ourselves on the side with the Na'vis? And (b) doesn't this just mean that it is human to be just?

It is not a surprise that our individual social identity and behaviour are somewhat flexible and dependent on a particular group or social situation.

However, as we find for example in the case of animal rights activism, we may also rank the idea of justice and ethics, themselves both concepts we have made up, above our identity as humans. So does this challenge the idea that being just and fair is very *human*? This is not so clear, as it also leaves the question: why is it also true that it is always humans who exploit others, independent of whether the others are human or not?

In appreciating these points, we can refer to the two major leading ideas in the modern approach to human nature:



*slavoj žižek has pointed to the backhanded racism of the analogy between naturalistic non-humans and the real victims of imperialism*

philosophical and scientific (respectively, psychological and mathematical).

In this regard Marx wrote about human nature as a species-essence dominated by social relations and incarnated instinctively in each individual. In Marx's view, while humans are essentially like any other animal, they have potentials which the individual can be alienated from, under capitalism:

"Man [sic] is directly a natural being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand endowed with natural powers, vital powers – he is an active natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities – as instincts. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his instincts exist outside him, as objects independent of him; yet these objects are objects that he needs – essential objects, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers" (1844, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*).

In more contemporary philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre based his existential approach on a simple but important concept: existence precedes essence. This shifts the emphasis from the natural essence of a person, to their conscious, decision-making being. Thus, whatever essence we may have individually as persons or collectively as a species, it must follow our conscious, decision making existence. It is this 'condemnation' to the 'freedom to choose' which the existentialist tradition is based on.

We may then ask: how unique are we in our decision making? Leading evolutionary psychologists such as Steve Pinker have recently argued strongly for the idea of human nature. This conclusion relies on the idea that in psychological research in the last century we can find trends in human behaviour, and this implies some universal boundaries in the complex and contradictory human mind and behaviour. Although at first this may seem to oppose the Sartrian hypothesis, one may argue that they can also complement each other.

With advancement of all science towards a mathematical approach we are likely to find the most scientific understanding of human nature in applied mathematics, chaos theory and the new field of complex systems.

In the prominent complex theory of sync, which can find in the writings of such scholars as Steven Strogatz, the only way we can begin to understand the essentially contradictory nature of human behaviour, is through appreciating the complexity of the systems which can give birth to it.

It is certainly true that our human brain, as a product of evolution and natural selection, has become better at identifying the repeating patterns emerging through the chaos of the millions of variables affecting each situation that requires conscious or unconscious decision making.

So to return to our question, one thing to note from watching *Avatar* is that no particular notion, whether it is justice or even a sense of human identity, necessarily has a 'natural' dominance over our decision making.

So while superficial "Hollywood Marxism" may create a fantasy world where rebellion is justified and the audience are moved by a seemingly justifiable violent struggle, even against humans, this simply raises question marks over how real struggles today are portrayed in liberal-democratic society.

Our feelings and decisions at any particular time rely on many factors and we cannot rely on people to make decisions in any particular way out of ideology. Rather, we must seek to challenge the currently-existing cultural hegemony as to create the environment for less alienated social relations.

# urgent proposals for dealing with global warming

a letter from Chris Miller

We need to do fresh thinking on the left on how to relate to the 'burning' issue of the day namely the possible ignition of the planet by runaway global warming. This will burn up all the pamphlets, theses, polemics on class struggle amongst the French proletariat in the 1930s, the class basis for the struggle against so-and so, and so on, and so on.

I would like to put these ideas forward for discussion:

1. Drastic steps must be taken in the next 10-20 years to mitigate climate change by beginning the large-scale decarbonising of the world economy. It will not have been completed by then but must be well on the way.

2. There is infinitesimal chance that there will be a world socialist revolution in the same period that is the next 10-20 years. There may be steps in that direction but it will not have arrived by then, certainly within the advanced capitalist economies.

3. It is very unlikely that the socialist left will have been able to produce its own climate change-mitigating technology in the above period. It has neither the resources nor the know-how.

4. This means that those climate-activists, left, right and centre, will have to rely largely on mitigating technologies e.g. solar panels, wind turbines, concentrated solar systems, Carbon sequestration and capture, geothermal, tidal barrages, wave energy, etc., developed in the private sector, that is, major and minor corporations and smaller companies such as Nanosolar Inc.

5. The present capitalist state system will have to play a central role in organising and helping to finance the large-scale projects necessary for the urgent action required.



*time to clean up the economy*

Some element of coercion may be necessary through the tax system. Strict state control of prices to prevent profiteering may also be necessary as in the UK during the Second World War.

6. The present capitalist state politicians and the corporations they represent are split on what to do about climate change. Very few (e.g. the free market head-bangers and Christian fundamentalists who believe Climate Change is a sign of the Lord's return) say there is no problem but they largely differ on the degree of urgency and the details of the action required. Even the large oil companies now admit

there is a problem but disagree on any actions that might limit their profits. They are heavily into Greenwash e.g. BP (British Petroleum) put it around recently that BP stood for Beyond Petroleum.

7. If the hierarchical and profit-oriented corporations cannot or will not act speedily enough then a campaign for taking them into public ownership under democratic control will be necessary. But that has to be shown in practice not simply asserting it as an ideological preference.

8. There is the need of a well-funded campaign to convince those who have bought the climate-change deniers message (60%+ in the US, 30-40% in the UK) that there is a real problem.

9. The left should put forward proposals that are serious attempts to tackle climate change and propose democratic control and ownership of the new energy systems where appropriate, e.g. distributed local power generation, public transport.

10. The left should also propose a massive science education campaign to support democratic controls – you cannot control something you do not understand.

11. Especially important is to pioneer a new relationship between communities in the developing and developed world. The only good aspect of Copenhagen is that it concluded that a new relationship between these two worlds is necessary, that the developed world had an historic debt (because of its cumulative carbon emissions at least, not to mention imperialist pillage) to help the developed world mitigate and adapt to climate change. This is a great opportunity for the left. c.f. my proposal for the North West of England of a Centre for Technology for Sustainable Development, publicly funded and owned.

# 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 freedom 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 aban-

donment 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.

## our pamphlets

the collapse of the eastern bloc and after  
Interviews with communists from the former USSR, Yugoslavia and Hungary twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall

what is the postal strike really about?  
Sheila Cohen's extensive interviews with post workers on the reasons behind the 2009 post strikes

storming heaven: the paris commune of 1871  
A section of Karl Marx's *Civil War in France*, produced alongside Solidarity's polemic against Trotsky's critique of the Paris Commune.

the revolution delayed: a decade of hugo chávez  
Charles Reeve interviews the *El Libertario* anarchist group on the current situation in Venezuela and the character of the Chávez government

the meaning of communism today  
Carré Rouge explore what kind of communist society we want to create

the movement for workers' councils in germany  
1938 GIK pamphlet on the post-WW1 revolution in Germany: includes biography of Jan Appel

the economic crisis: an interview with andrew kliman  
The author of *Reclaiming Marx's Capital* explains the roots of, and solutions to, the 2008 collapse

strategy for industrial struggle  
A 1971 Solidarity pamphlet on different means of collective action in the workplace: introduction about the lessons for today by Chris Kane

nationalisation or workers' management?  
Articles by Solidarity, the Institute for Workers' Control, the Left Economics Advisory Panel and others challenging both statist and market variants of socialism and advocating democratic control of workplaces.

bolivia: class struggle and social crisis  
Documents from the Bolivian workers' movement on the September 2008 clashes between the Evo Morales government, the far-right backed by the oligarchy, and the country's radical social movements.

### how to order

All pamphlets cost £1 + 50p postage per copy, except 'what is the postal strike really about?' (50p only).

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