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# the ★ commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below issue 15, July 2010 £1

## beyond 'resistance', beyond alienation

## for the right not to work!

### editorial of *The Commune*

With its first cuts plans the Conservative-LibDem coalition has declared war on the working class.

Day by day we hear fresh appeals to accept mass redundancies, tighten our belts and heap blame on the 'work-shy' who are somehow meant to find jobs.

In a sense, the position of communists and the workers' movement more broadly is obviously weak. The lay-offs and cuts, which had already begun under the Labour government, have only sparked isolated moments of reaction.

Millions are angry at suffering because of the capitalist crisis, but have no confidence in their ability to change the way the world works. In the UK as in crisis-ridden and strike-plagued Greece, a massive cut in working-class living standards is the obvious capitalist solution. Indeed, short of a challenge to the basic assumptions of the system itself, it is inevitable.

To emerge from a state of weakness, or even passivity, we must pose a more fundamental challenge to the order we live in. Fighting this or that cut in jobs and services is insufficient: for that is only organising a defensive reaction to events, not a challenge to how the world is run.

#### The state we're in

Capital is constantly adaptable, ever-revolutionised to exert greater control. On one hand, our employment status and stake in this society is ever-more unstable; on the other, the demands of capital accumulation have an ever-increasing stranglehold over our free time.

In response, many on the left repeat the same old mantras, leading only defensive and sectional struggles while ultimately accepting that the cuts do have to fall somewhere - preferably on 'someone else'. Some unions have even produced alternative, 'fairer' cuts plans. They question the way in which the products of capitalism are allotted, not the system itself.

But capitalism is not just a system which unfairly distributes wealth amongst the population, or wastes money on weapons rather than schools and hospitals. Rather, it is a series of social relations and hierarchies, at that, a profoundly alienated one.

The much-vaunted need to 'calm market fears' or 'stabilise the euro' typifies this. An imaginary representation of capital accumulation is allowed to rule over our own



*middlesex uni occupation: 'you kant do this': see page 2*

needs and wants. This is much like the manner in which religious people police themselves with the laws of divine powers who are in fact mere human creations.

Capitalism denies our human potential. For the sake of order it drills into us the idea that we are powerless; that some are destined to manage and lecture others, whereas the rest of us can change nothing. This is both the main obstacle to building a confident challenge to our rulers, and a central characteristic of existing social relations we need to uproot.

Therefore it is not enough to demand full employment and better wages in spite of the plans for cuts: this only goes so far as asking how to run the capitalist state in a 'socialist' way. It does not help us escape from living out the existing social relations.

#### New order

Rather, communists must advocate a vision to inspire, one which challenges the many hierarchies and expressions of alienation in capitalist society. Only by fighting these alienated relations in the here and now - and including, within the left - could we ever hope to rebuild a confident and revolutionary opposition to the existing social order.

Thus campaigns against education cuts should not only ask why the government is cutting the deficit, but what the purpose and content of education really is and what are the relations between 'teacher' and 'student', between learning and institution.

The fight against redundancies should not glamourise 'our industries' or 'skilled trades' but rather be combined with the demand for the right of all to a comfortable life with the maximum of free time and opportunity for learning and leisure.

In struggles against the coalition government we must resist the efforts of managerial Labour politicians - or left group hacks - to take the 'leadership' and control of campaigns which are our common endeavour.

Whatever the context, communists should challenge all existing power relations. We must leave no gendered or racist prejudice unchallenged, no overt nor informal hierarchy left standing. We want the real empowerment of millions, not just a few tawdry 'left' politicians like Diane Abbott.

Challenging ourselves, prefiguring our communist vision, is the best means to challenge the structures of domination to which capitalism subjects us. Bureaucracy and hierarchy on the left is not the result of some inbuilt flaw of humanity but the failure to confront the mores the system constantly pounds into us.

#### Communism

This issue of *The Commune* features articles on how communists should organise (pages 9-11) whereas also drawing the lessons of recent disputes, from the Middlesex University occupation to the nine-week cleaners' strike in Holland.

What is most important is to see the communism latent in the struggles of today: we are not just fighting today's cuts, today's managers, today's politicians, but looking to imbue our organisations today with the principles of the society we hope to build for the future.

The left does not have to be bureaucratic, lethargic, without spirit. The left does not have to be undemocratic even more than capitalist society: as many left groups are. The left does not have to reflect the alienation of working-class existence in capitalist society. *The Commune* looks to express a challenge to alienation, a challenge to the assumption that we are powerless and that humanity deserves its current fate.

"All the idols made by humanity, however terrifying they may be, are in point of fact subordinate to us, and that is why we will always have it in our power to destroy them."

- Simone de Beauvoir

The recent Right to Work conference was apparently a great success with some 600 people attending, a demo in support of BA workers after and a call to demonstrate on 22nd June, Budget Day.

All very good, but steps towards a truly communist society should recognise that there's more to life than work.

People need time and resources to fulfil their potential, and whilst there need to be work and planning in the future communist society this should not be based on continuing to squeeze more and more productivity out of workers. Something the trad Bolshevik left have missed, after all we might all get agitated about speed ups, Lean working etc... but Lenin introduced the mechanistic Taylorist approach to production...and Trotsky quite fancied the militarisation of labour.

Fast forward to 2010 and what do we find? More scope than ever to substantially reduce the amount of time workers work due to unimagined advances in IT, the fact that that we are as a society richer than ever and hence well able to fund pensions etc. But what do we get?

- ★ Increases in the retirement age
- ★ Reduction of pensions (though not for the rich who on average retire early on mega bucks)
- ★ Pressure to work longer hours, overtime resulting in UK workers working longer than certainly anyone else in the EU
- ★ Anyone unable to work due to illness vilified, sacked... then forced back to work through draconian measures!

In the 21st century we should surely have the right not to work, to retire when we choose, to work less hours, have more leave, sabbaticals, if we are ill to be supported and helped. Yet all this is under attack: 'work til you drop' is the new mantra, and the tired old left is falling for it.

Short term we as communists should new agitating and fighting for not just resistance to job cuts and wages but:

- ★ a reduced pension age to 50, releasing work for others
- ★ pensions to be based on a living wage
- ★ shorten the working week to 30 hours, spread out the work and benefits provided by IT to all, not just the bosses
- ★ supportive action on illness and disability: when we are unable to work we should receive a reasonable and liveable benefit
- ★ support the call from Greens for a universal citizens' income
- ★ tax the rich, especially investments

Long term we must fight for a communist society based on workers' self management to produce what is needed and recognize the right of all to self fulfilment and reaching their potential through a balance of work, rest and play.

# lessons of the middlesex occupation

★ A Middlesex student looks at the recent student occupation in protest at the closure of the philosophy department

The timing of the Middlesex occupation – during the general election, and so just before major cuts across the country – means that it is particularly important to draw lessons from it. A group of us are in the process of collaboratively writing up our experiences for the benefit of future occupations. However, this has not yet been completed, so what follows is simply a personal and partial account of some of the positives and negatives of the occupation.

The best thing about the occupation – which lasted for twelve days and covered a whole building – was that it proved how much a small number of people can do if they have the energy and the will. Because the occupation was a response to the closure of the philosophy department, most involved were philosophy students, and many were part-time and postgraduates, who hardly knew each other beyond the occasional confused questions in weekly seminars. We started with forty people, although numbers varied because of people's work and other commitments.

These numbers were boosted considerably every time we held an event, when students from other universities and people from other struggles came to support us. There was unfortunately little involvement from other Middlesex students, largely because the academic year had ended; the occupied campus is an hour away from the main campus; and because Middlesex lacks any recent tradition of protest and so any established 'activist' or political groups.

Although the lack of other Middlesex students was a huge disadvantage, the absence of established groups with their own agendas was for the best. The only home-grown politicians we had to contend with were the Middlesex Students' Union. However, they made it very clear they wanted nothing to do with us: the President denounced the occupation on the first day – she was told to leave – and, in a meeting between management and students, she asked to observe for management! The lack of support from the Students' Union was a blessing, allowing us to work together without their motions, amendments and other stalling techniques.

This was complemented by a lack of imported politicians – for whatever reason, the SWP and their various splits and counter factions clearly decided the occupation wasn't worth staying for. So, apart from a few 'representatives' at the couple of mass meetings we had, preaching was kept to a minimum, and was completely absent from the meetings in which we decided to escalate, and from the day to day running of the occupation. This meant that people developed ways of working together largely free of structures, and that the expansion took place spontaneously, organically and according to what at any one time seemed possible, rather than as a result of following blueprints. From a day-time occupation of the boardroom to an occupation for the night, from occupation for the night to occupation of the whole building, it was us who made each move.

On the tenth day of the occupation, management begged us to come to a meeting in which they offered us nothing. The next morning, before even waiting for our response to their 'offer' – which they rightly guessed would have been refused – we were given a letter from their lawyer, informing us that they were going to the High Court to get an injunction. We received the injunction at 8pm, at which point security prevented more people coming in. With twelve hours before the injunction came into effect, we had a meeting to decide what to do. Luckily, we'd had an event that evening, so there were quite a few people around – forty at least.

While previously we had seemed determined to stay forever, the inclusion of seven individuals' names on the injunction – apparently found by management on Facebook – really frightened people. We didn't understand the implications of this, and so many left, feeling that they would otherwise be endangering those who had been named. Although it was decided at the meeting – with encouragement from those named – that people who were able and willing to defy the injunction should, only about fifteen stayed beyond the time that the injunction came into effect.

**“The best thing about the occupation was that it proved how much a small number of people can do if they have the energy and the will”.**

The next day, due to a breakdown of communication with those outside, the pressure upon those inside, and a feeling that no-one else would come into the occupation even if it were possible, we decided to leave. This ended what had been quite a powerful occupation with a bitter aftertaste. For me, bumping into Tariq Ali giving a speech outside only made that worse, returning to the same old people and the same old politics. The injunction had served its purpose of frightening us into leaving, and temporarily breaking us as a group. However, the fact that it was not enforced showed us – too late – that an injunction does not mean the police will raid the next day, suggesting that we would have been able to stay at least a few days longer if we had wanted to.

The week afterwards we occupied the library for a night, which, although not disruptive, was very important for morale, and meant that in the end we all defied the injunction – for it covered all Middlesex property.

This was followed by the suspension of four students and three staff members, a night camping outside the university's flagship campus and a disruption of the university's glossy art show on Brick Lane. Those who were suspended were those people who were both named on the injunction and defied the injunction by going to the library, plus a few extras who had been in the library. These people were iden-

tified through CCTV cameras in the library. Looking back, we should have covered these up!

Suspended students are not allowed to enter university property without permission, although this is only for a limited period until the university decides to lift it. In the first hearing, students were made to promise not to occupy again. However, in a subsequent suspension, the university dropped that condition, perhaps worried – rightly – that the student would refuse to make that promise, thus putting them in the difficult position of having to find a harsher punishment – which might dirty their own reputation still further. The subsequent events and the nonsense of the hearings have given us enough confidence that I believe that if the occupation happened again, many more people would stay beyond the injunction, whether or not they were named. No university management, no matter how angry, wants to be shown dragging their students out with police.

Another difficulty with the occupation was the fact that it was in protest against a cut to a particular department, leading to a problematic over-emphasis on the worth of 'philosophy' and a link to a campaign which focused on the department's high research ratings, both of which didn't help when making links to struggles against cuts in general. Demanding the reinstatement of the philosophy department made it seem that we were simply asking for keeping the status quo, rather than fighting for something more. Focus on our demand could also lead to the conclusion that the occupation was a complete failure: now that the philosophy centre has been moved to Kingston University, management have not only got away with closing a whole department and suspending students and staff but have shipped off most of the troublemakers to another institution.

However, there was much more to this occupation than its demand. As well as developing our own confidence to go further next time, it allowed us to create alliances with other universities and struggles. It also enabled us to make links with staff at Middlesex – we had a meeting in which about forty administrative, academic and service staff made it very clear that they were part of our struggle and hated management as much as we do. Although the staff unions were not officially supportive of the occupation, a substantial group of the staff have organised with us to create a broader 'Save Middlesex' campaign, to expand the fight to all students and staff at Middlesex against the further cuts that will be coming in the next year.

Despite its limitations, this occupation serves as an example of how far it is possible to go with only a small group of students, free of political party interference, gradually challenging more and more of what they had previously taken for granted. The inevitable occupations in the coming year, as cuts hit in nationally, can learn lessons from Middlesex, both from how far we went and from how much further we could have gone.

## from greek crisis to european fightback?

★ The following is an interview on the Greek crisis with Constantinos Avramidis – a Greek resident in Ireland, member of the Workers' Solidarity Movement.

**What is the real strength of the strike and what can it achieve?**

Protests and strikes can't achieve much now, honestly. Now the time is to organise massive work stoppages together with occupations... the aim has to be to bring the government down. They will have to hold a referendum on the whole question of the EU and the IMF, and then we have to have a massive reconstruction of the public sector, fight corruption at all levels, starting from the top.

**What are the political and social actors that can bring about those changes you talk about?**

That's not clear. You see, in Greece there are more people with a class consciousness than in other parts of Europe. But still it is not that significant a percentage of the population such as could achieve massive change. The majority of trade unions are affiliated to the big parties, Conservative and Socialist, except for PAME which is affiliated to the Communist Party. The problem with them is that even though they have 10% of the electorate they do not bring fresh ideas, they speak to an audience of people that were around in the '50s. They call people to the streets because they have no other option: the leadership has to obey the will of their own people. The president of a private sector union, GSSE, a few weeks ago was almost lynched by his own rank and file when he was trying to calm people down at a demonstration. There is not much room for them to

express any opinions other than the general feeling. The rest of the left, and the anarchists, are trying to blend in the union movement, which is good, because they achieve more working politically where the people are, but this is not enough... they should have done this years ago. The anarchists marched only in detached blocks, there was a bit of vanguardism, but now they are starting to march with their unions and with their social organisations which is a positive development.

**Some people in the media claim that the protest in Greece is dying at the moment...**

I have different information: they are growing stronger. But eventually there will be a breather for a while, though it will not die, because summer will come and a lot of people will go on holiday, they may get a few bonuses for pensioners to leave for holidays. People will come back, the bonuses will be gone, pensions and wages will be reduced, they will still be paying credits and education is collapsed. It will be just a little break. Perhaps summer will not have a calming effect at all. This is a special year, a special time and we are speculating, it is hard to know what will actually happen, is the first time the country has been in such a mess, a mess in the making for the last 30 years.

**What do you think will be the possible scenarios to solve the crisis?**

One scenario that I want to see is Greece leading the world scene by achieving something that has not been achieved anywhere else. I don't want to see my country isolated in a

Cuban model, with embargoes, etc. What we need to see is that we manage to get out of obligations imposed by the capitalist leadership: out of NATO, all the bases and foreign troops out, out of the IMF, out of the EU. It is not an alliance of equals: we are being made to pay the price. We are supposedly living under the same roof but we are the tenants of the basement. We need a referendum and I think a lot of people will vote not to pay because we have not caused the debt, this was caused by market speculators, politicians, capitalists.

The second stage is to bring those who are responsible to account and pass the bill to them. We also need to build independent trade unions that democratise the working class, so they fulfil their job to educate, agitate and organise... I think that this could have a domino effect on other countries like Iceland – they had a referendum, and they voted not to pay Holland or the UK the debt they did not cause in the first place. The people did not create the crisis, the banks did.

But we don't know how the situation will progress. We lack many of the things which might help the situation progress, but the worst scenario would be that the military takes over. That may mean that Greece would be expelled from the EU in the worst possible way. And this way the IMF could impose their will through a dictator as the US has done in the past. That's the worst case scenario. I have the feeling that the army has no will to intervene, there is a broader political spectrum within the army now that would make such a decision difficult. The people have had enough.



# what use an abbott in a 'broad church'?

★ As Diane Abbott wins sufficient nominations to stand for Labour Party leader, Taimour Lay looks at her and her party's credentials.

What use is a "broad church" when the pews are empty, the foundations are subsiding and the high priests at altar turn their backs on any shout of dissent? The Labour leadership election, far from being "saved" by the inclusion of Diane Abbott, has merely continued to go to form – token 'left' candidate takes on four former cabinet ministers of varying degrees of conservatism, "enlivens" the hustings with some maverick, contrarian and media-populist rhetoric before the vote concludes with a Miliband, Balls or Burnham promising to lead Labour back to "electability".

Abbott's candidacy is theatre designed by the New Labour establishment to present a democratic, inclusive party. For misguided Bennites, it's also part of their message: come home to Labour, disillusioned socialists, in opposition we will rebuild and steer the party left.

Not that Abbott can even be described a socialist, of course. Her 'rebellious' parliamentary career has been characterised by an easy outspokenness on civil liberties issues but also support for Tube privatisation and as MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, resolute inaction on the housing crisis and a single-minded focus on bantering with Michael Portillo on the BBC.

Now she has taken the chance to undermine John McDonnell's attempt to garner enough nominations to stand, wilfully and cheerfully oblivious to the fact that she got to the magic number 33 only through the support of fellow hopeful David Miliband. The cosy club of contenders wanted her in. Her reward? The shadow cabinet or a run for London mayor come 2012.

McDonnell failed to gain the nominations he needed to stand precisely because he represented – if not a threat – at least a genuine, principled critique within the Parliamentary Labour Party. His commitment to strikes, migrant worker struggles and organising in London led some in The Commune to advocate support for his General Election campaign. But support for his re-election on the back of his record as an MP and socialist – reformist or other-



*abbott is taking a break from her tv work to bolster her career in the labour machine*

wise – is different to contending that a McDonnell-led Labour party would have been the answer to the political and economic attacks being made by the government right now. The fallacy of Labour's broad church applies just as much to him. His candidacy, though it would have been less "token" than Abbott's in providing a genuine alternative, was as doomed as hers. He sits in the same set of pews – the Campaign group of MPs – but as an isolated member of the congregation, tolerated only to the extent that internal party structures can be used to nullify the strand of heretical labourism he represents.

The result of the electoral college of MPs, Unions and Constituency Labour Parties will be announced in September. However strong Abbott's showing as the mythical candidate of the left, the leadership and shadow cabinet choir, as usual, will all be singing from the same hymn sheet. As with the general election, the real work needs to start outside and beyond the anti-democratic institutions that call for our own token participation in their rule.

# who benefits from cuts?

by Adam Ford

European governments have been announcing public spending cuts almost daily since they agreed a €750 billion 'rescue package' for the euro currency in May.

Greece (€30 billion), Spain (€80 billion), Italy (£24 billion) and Portugal (£2 billion), have been joined by the new UK government, which has slashed £6 billion with immediate effect, and promised the financial markets much, much more.

Conservative Chancellor George Osborne and Liberal Democrat Treasury Secretary David Laws (later forced to resign following expenses revelations) declared there would be a civil service "recruitment freeze", along with substantial losses for regional and university budgets. The Transport department will lose £683 million.

The coalition's announcement was merely a starter course, meant to reassure the super rich that it means business, ahead of an 'emergency budget' on 22nd June. Still, public sector job losses are expected to be in the hundreds of thousands. Those hundreds of thousands will join dole queues, at a time when the unemployment rate is already 8%. There, they will be exposed to the reforms being prepared by Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith.

Despite his professed concern for the UK's "broken society", Duncan Smith wants to cut the welfare bill, and exert downward pressure on wages, by having many more desperate people fighting for each vacancy. Jobseeker's Allowance claimants face losing benefits if they refuse to take a job offer on new "work programmes".

Meanwhile, Incapacity Benefit recipients will also be attending Job Centres, because "tougher" medical tests will apparently decide if they are capable of undertaking "desk



*'workfare' looms for those who lose their jobs*

or administrative jobs or part-time work". Entitlements to housing assistance will be cut, and Duncan Smith wants to phase out the idea of a default retirement age altogether, so that workers "continue to keep working and contributing".

While the corporate media routinely demonises unemployed people who exist on as little as £60 a week – or less if under 25 – it rarely questions the vastly greater handouts to those bankers at the top, who genuinely do contribute nothing to society.

Exposed to this propaganda on a daily basis, some working class people will support Duncan Smith's proposal to bury the "cradle to grave" welfare state – a post-war gain which workers fought tooth and nail to secure.

But the ratio of jobseekers to available jobs is growing, and that is a state of affairs which only benefits the elite. A broad-based workers' fightback will have to include solidarity with welfare claimants.

# new labour in opposition

by Dave Spencer

After a recent "public consultation" meeting of our local NHS I was approached by an old right-wing Labour councillor. "Have you considered re-joining the Labour Party?" he asked. "We need people like you to re-build the Party, get us back to our roots." He went on about the 'good old days'.

I was a bit taken aback. I didn't like to remind him that I had been expelled along with 125 others in 1992 for objecting to the rigging of ballots for the shortlist for MP, or that I and others had been told on a number of occasions that we had no chance of promotion or another job working for Coventry City Council if we continued as left activists. I remember seeing good comrades turn round and leave a meeting when they saw Bob Ainsworth (later Labour MP for Coventry North East and Minister for War) sitting in the corner with his tape recorder and note pad ready to get evidence – for what purpose one can only imagine.

The serious point is that now New Labour is in opposition it has to re-create itself to re-gain power in 2015. Already the contenders for the Labour Party leadership are distancing themselves from the legacy of 13 years of Blair and Brown. Councillors and MPs are starting to speak out against the coming cuts in jobs and services in order to pose as the leaders of any protest movements – putting on a left face. They will of course swing the trade union bureaucrats behind them.

This is sickening: we know that if New Labour had won the election they would be implementing savage cuts – as their 'comrades' in government in Greece, Spain and elsewhere will be doing. And furthermore the "great discussions" we had in the 1980s were about the left's opposition to local Labour Councils carrying through Thatcher's cuts.

Why would anybody with red blood coursing through their veins join the Labour Party? Apparently some on the left are. The usual left argument is the quote from *The Communist Manifesto*: "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."

The Labour Party is no longer a mass party of the working class. In the 1950s my uncle was a shop steward at Armstrong Whitworth, the secretary of his AEU branch and treasurer of the local Ward Labour Party. There was a connection between workplace, trade union and community Labour Party. There would be none of this left group nonsense of giving out a leaflet a week before the election and expecting people to vote for you. The Labour Party was an organic part of the community. But this type of mass organisation no longer exists.

Another argument for joining the Labour Party is — with a campaign or project in mind. But what could possibly be the project or campaign in the Labour Party now? There is no way to influence LP policy via the Conference. There is no Young Socialist organisation.

There is no way to de-select MPs or councillors – decisions come from the bureaucrats above not from local parties. Why be just used as leafleting fodder for the right wing? Personally I cannot see any scope for setting up a left campaign or project within Labour.

The fact that a number of independent socialists are joining Labour is a result of the failure over 13 years of the UK left groups to form a broad united workers' movement as an alternative to New Labour. We have had the Socialist Alliance, the Scottish Socialist Party and Respect – all of which have collapsed or been sabotaged, depending how you look at it.

There must be lessons learned before we go ahead with any new organisation. The key has to be building from below any opposition to the coalition's cuts in jobs and services; building active local groups in a democratic and united manner. Any national body should be a network of these local groups.

What we do not want are vanguardist elites or parties who think they know all the answers trying to take over and close us down if we do not agree with them – like the SWP did to the Socialist Alliance. In these local Save Our Jobs and Services groups we will no doubt come across members of the Labour Party as well as of the left groups. Provided they behave in an open and democratic manner, they should of course be welcomed.



# israeli state sparks outrage

‘they were like hyenas in the dark waiting to pounce’

★ On 31st May Israeli troops boarded ships in international waters heading to Gaza as part of a Freedom Flotilla.

The flotilla sought to bring much-needed aid to Palestinians long starved out by Israeli blockade.

Yet the activists were stopped in international waters and Israeli commandos opened fire on activists, killing nine people.

*The Commune* spoke to Fintan Lane, an Irish solidarity activist aboard the *Challenger 1*.

**What led you to join the flotilla? Have been involved in activism related to Palestine before?**

I've been involved in leftist activism for many years and in anti-war activism, in particular, in the past decade. Palestine solidarity work has always been an element of my activism but it's taken centre-stage since the Israeli massacre in Gaza in 2008-9. I'm a member of the National Committee of the Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC).

**What was your experience of being on board the flotilla?**

My experience was simultaneously depressing and uplifting. Depressing because of the deaths of the nine brave activists from Turkey; uplifting because of the sense of determination and collective purpose that preceded and followed those deaths. Indeed, although Israel clearly set out to deter international solidarity by deploying extreme violence against unarmed activists, it is now certain that the attack on the flotilla has strengthened the resolve of those involved and many others are now building for the next flotilla.



*the Mavi Marmara was part of a flotilla carrying 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, including food, wheelchair*

**Can you describe what you saw and heard when the raid happened?**

We were aware of an Israeli naval presence around the flotilla for some hours before the assault occurred but when it happened, it was without warning. The Israeli commandos in their zodiacs were like hyenas in the dark waiting for their

moment to pounce - we couldn't see them but we knew they were out there circling. When the zodiacs moved in at high speed, we spotted them before they reached the back of our boat - *Challenger 1* - and our captain put the foot down.

Ours was probably the fastest boat in the flotilla and the wake meant that the zodiacs were unable to come in close

# atrocities stir protests in tel aviv

by Solomon Anker

The attack by the Israeli military in general received the support of the majority of the Israeli public. This is not a shock because also the Gaza War (2009) and the Lebanon War (2006) received similar backing.

However the difference is that the minority opposed to the attack on the Flotilla is much larger and, even better far more politically active in opposing the government.

In general the Israeli Communist Party, Anarchists and Arab Nationalists oppose with street action and protest the immoral actions of the IDF.

However, significantly, the Social Democratic Party (Meretz), Peace Now and a number of NGOs decided to finally - for possibly the first time in history - protest against the actions of the State.

A few hours after the attack against the Flotilla, emails flooded the inboxes of people with links to left-wing organizations and SMSs were sent to friends and friends of friends about demos taking place. Thousands attended demos including a significantly higher number of Jewish Israelis than expected.

On 5th June, where already a scheduled protest against the 43rd Year of the Occupation was taking place, far more people decided to come along to call for the end of the military occupation than usual.

These new people mainly came from the soft peace organizations whom are super scared of being criticized by the Israeli right wing and of being branded traitors. The Meretz Party receives regular abuse and threats from Ultra Nationalists and is mocked by the Liberals too. However, the heat of the situation got many of these to finally take to the streets and protest.



*there is a small anti-war movement in israel, as shown at this 2009 demo in tel aviv*

The Meretz Party and Peace Now are often described as "Zionist-Fascism with a human face". Arab Nationalist and many foreign Marxists have believed that Meretz are more dangerous than the right-wing as they trick people into believing Zionism can be moral.

Yet after the flotilla attack their members took a big step to protest directly against the Israeli State and in their words showed full compassion for the people of Gaza.

At the 5th June demo in Tel Aviv around 10,000 people attended. These numbers are very impressive for a country of 7 million where there is such powerful opposition from both the far-right national-religious groups and the mainstream.

The liberal Palestinian nationalist groups in Israel did not support the demonstration, because Israeli flags were present. However, the Arab left came in force including many Arab Socialists who wore their Arab identity proudly while marching together with Jewish people.

At the demo the Palestinian Kafir was widely present and Palestinian flags too. Furthermore Arabic was spoken at the podium of the demonstration. These seem like nothing radical from a European perspective but for the Middle East they are revolutionary and break the barriers of both anti-Jewish hatred and anti-Arab hatred.

Altogether the actions of the Israeli military have given a boost to the left-wing and have really harmed the Israeli State.

Signs of the occupation breaking completely were present when after the demonstration a massive fight almost broke out between 200 Ultra-Nationalists and the left-wing protesters.

The leftists refused to be intimidated and sang together "Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies." The Israeli police needed to bring in huge force including a row of police on horses to prevent a fight.

The self-righteous Israeli liberals - who are only capable of mocking the Ultra-Nationalists and also mocking the left-wing while thinking they are the centre of the earth as they live their empty and meaningless life in the cafés of north Tel Aviv - were totally silent.

However these self-righteous Tel-Avivians and the mainstream media of Israel will eventually have to break and oppose the occupation.

Not out of any humanity or compassion for the suffering of the Palestinians, but purely out of a capitalist self-interest, because a bad reputation for Israel abroad or fighting on the streets between left and right will be bad for business and a little embarrassing for their self-image.

Once they start calling for the withdrawals of the IDF from Gaza and the West Bank, the occupation will be on the verge of ending.



# ge with aid flotilla attack



s, books, toys, and medicine

to board us. We passed very close to the *Mavi Marmara*, on its left-hand side, as we attempted to evade our pursuers and I saw the activists on that ship doing their best to fend off the Israeli boats with low-pressure hoses and bags of rubbish – there was a helicopter overhead and we heard what sounded like gunshots.

It was clear that the large ship was under serious attack. We continued past the Turkish ship and broke from the flo-

tilla, holding our course for Gaza. After a while the pursuing Israelis dropped back but a larger gunship was then seen directly ahead, apparently on a collision course with ourselves. To avoid a ramming, our captain slowed down and immediately the zodiacs reappeared and moved in fast to board us.

A stun grenade was thrown towards me as I went to shut the door to the back deck where we'd also built a barricade; nonetheless, I got the door closed and we piled up some furniture, including a heavy table, to slow them down.

We non-violently resisted their boarding party once they were on board but were overwhelmed. I should clarify that the only violence used was that deployed by the Israeli commandos who assaulted many of the 17 people on board including myself. While taking the fly-deck, they tasered an Australian photojournalist.

Elsewhere, they shot one young woman in the face with a plastic bullet and they badly hurt a Palestinian activist while tying and hooding her. I was stomped on at one stage and also had a gun pointed into my face by a very agitated commando who was shouting that he was going to shoot me.

“The next flotilla is likely to be larger than the last one – it will certainly head for Gaza with an equal determination”

Extreme violence was used. It seems that their objective was to seize the flotilla as quickly as possible by any means they deemed necessary. They also immediately set about stealing all the cameras and phones on the boat.

**How were you treated by the Israeli state after the raid?**

Not well. We were held at gunpoint until we got to Israel, at which stage we refused to leave the ship, pointing out that we were en route to Gaza and had no interest in entering Israel. We linked arms and refused to move, but were dragged off by the commandos.

I was wrestled off *Challenger 1* by four Israeli commandos and handed over to police on the quayside. Inside the proc-



the israeli government absurdly claimed this collection of sticks and knives found on board the flotilla posed a dangerous threat

essing centre, I refused to recognise their authority and pointed out that we had been kidnapped in international waters and brought to Israel illegally.

I refused to show my passport, so they twisted my arm high behind my back and took it from my pocket. It was a most surreal moment when they told me that I was to be charged with entering Israel illegally.

**What do you think the future is for the movement to lift the siege on Gaza? Do you think future convoys will be effective?**

I think the attack on the Freedom Flotilla has raised international awareness of the siege of Gaza to unprecedented levels. More and more people want to act in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Direct action is essential.

The next flotilla is likely to be larger than the last one – it will certainly head for Gaza with an equal determination and we are intent on breaking the Israeli blockade. The ending of the siege of Gaza is a short-term objective, not a medium- or long-term one. It will happen, through a combination of Palestinian resistance and international solidarity. It must happen soon.

## solidarity, not silence: the boycott debate

★ Here we publish one activist's contribution to the ongoing left debate over the proposed academic boycott of Israel. We welcome further letters and articles: on this topic: email us at [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com) or comment online.

by Greg Brown

Following the recent assault by the IDF on the Free Gaza Flotilla carrying 10,000 tonnes of aid to Gaza, people have been reminded that the Israeli-Palestinian “conflict” has continued while our concentration drifted elsewhere.

Thus re-emerges a debate among activists as to how the “left” should respond – should we support the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions?

Among students in the National Campaign Against Fees & Cuts this is centring around whether or not to officially back the academic boycott of Israel. Trotskyist student factions from Workers Power/Revolution have been the most vocal in favour, while the AWL has stood firmly against.

It is Revolution which has taken the correct stance here. To show you why, let's consider three enduring truths about the “conflict” that the recent events have reminded us of:

★ First, that the Palestinians of course continue to suffer an especially violent military occupation by Israel, and that Gaza is still under siege. In other words, Palestine is still colonised by Israel.

★ Second, that Israel acts as it pleases, especially in order to maintain the IDF's military “deterrence”, and is not only indifferent but committed (when deemed “necessary”) to killing unarmed and innocent civilians in the process – the nine murdered flotilla activists as a case in point.

Third, that Israeli opposition to the state's brutality is very limited. Despite some public outcry, the most damning popular reaction that could be heard coming from Israel amounted to: “How very stupid to attack and kill the protesters! The ships should have been peacefully intercepted

instead. Now our whole security programme against Gaza will be undermined!”

There seems to be fortunately very little disagreement about these simple facts among the student activists. However, it is in spite of these facts, and not because of them, that the AWL has taken the stance that it has. They argue that the Israeli left is “small and weak” and “needs support and solidarity”, and that furthermore: “Boycotts will certainly weaken the left, internationalist, pro-Palestinian wing inside Israel, and strengthen the right, by making Israelis feel as if a hostile world is pressing down on them.” And, importantly: “Boycotts will harm, not help, the Palestinians.”

Of course there can be no refuting their rightful concern and consideration for Israeli workers as well as for oppressed Palestinians, but the belief that boycotts can in any respect hinder the Israeli left seems like inverted optimism. Sure enough, there are of course two possible effects successful boycotts may have on the Israeli political dynamic.

The first is the one AWL imagines, where the bulk of Israeli society (and workers in particular) rally behind the government in the face of international adversity. As mentioned above, this is already fundamentally the case (see my third point).

The second scenario is one where critical Israelis draw additional support (“If only we had listened to the likes of Gideon Levy, Ilan Pappé or even Matzpen sooner then we wouldn't be in this situation!”) which would of course only be a step in the right direction.

So between the two scenarios we should understand that, politically, things can hardly get worse as a direct result of a boycott alone. If the Israeli “left” is to suffer, it will be due to reinvigorated state repression – something for which it would be frightful to blame BDS activists rather than Israeli ruling élites.

Arguments in favour of an academic boycott are barely disturbed by concern for Israeli workers. Even if we are to say

that university lecturers and senior researchers are workers, their sheer complicity in the occupation cannot be ignored.

That a substantial proportion of Israeli academics double up as commanding officers in the IDF is telling enough; that racist and colonial ideas of how to deal with Israel's “demographic problem” (that Israeli Jews will soon be outnumbered by Palestinian Arabs inside Israel and the Occupied Territories within a few years) come from some of Israel's leading academicians further proves the point.

In light of the situation it seems disastrous to place a concern for the Israeli working class above that of the Palestinian people. I agree completely that it is incumbent on the Israeli working class to champion a progressive solution to the conflict. But the idea that this can happen while a blind eye is turned to those who actively support that colonial oppression is backward.

Would we or would we not have boycotted Italian beneficiaries from the occupation of Ethiopia in 1936 onward? If Italian workers had chosen to throw their support behind that colonisation then they too would rightly have been seen as worthy of contempt, not unconditional support.

We must not believe that seeing the working class as the class of potential revolution means a cult of the worker, a worshipful belief that the class can do no wrong. It can and it does. Our attitude should be critical.

Anything less equates workers with children, incapable of making decisions. On this point it is important to note that the call for BDS has been backed very loudly by Palestinian workers and trade unions (including the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions) – they are well aware of all the implications, and have decided it to be the best tool for international solidarity.

We must put the question very clearly to Israeli workers: whose side are you on? The side of peace and justice, or the side of your reactionary rulers and bosses? To boycott Israel is the firmest way to pose this question.



# holland: victory for nine-week strike

by Willem Dekker

The cleaning sector was fully privatized at the end of the nineties. Since then competition has been driving wages down and work pressure up. In the summer of 2009 cleaners, of whom most come from a migrant background, launched a campaign for higher wages, better working conditions and more respect from management. In times of austerity this campaign raised the stakes of industrial conflict. If the cleaners could get a raise – why couldn't other workers? The campaign turned into a model for multicultural resistance against the cut-backs.

Let me take you back a month ago, somewhere in Amsterdam: It was crowded in the room, more than a hundred strikers from several Amsterdam office buildings sat together in their weekly meeting; it seemed chaotic, people going for coffee or a quick smoke, several different languages were being spoken at the same time, English, Turkish, Arabic and of course Dutch. But it wasn't chaotic, it was excitement, tension and translation.

Abdelillah, a young migrant on strike, had just told everybody that he had been fired for being on strike, and the company letter went from hand to hand.

Only recently arrived in the Netherlands, when asked to go on strike, he didn't hesitate, "In Morocco I used to do the same". Mohamed a strike leader from government agency UWV, stood up. He reminded everybody about this fact and about the resolution that had been passed by all cleaners on strike in the Netherlands. An injury to one, is an injury to all. "We made this agreement, now we must live up to it, we must all go to his workplace, and demand his reinstatement. It could be you next time. In the past weeks we have grown our army of strikers from thirty to more than a hundred, we can make every building in this area of Amsterdam go on strike, so we for sure can save Abdelillah's job. We must contact our brothers and sisters in other cities about this as



*a six-day sit-in at utrecht railway station showed cleaners' determination*

soon as possible." As a union organizer, that was the signal to take my phone and make the call.

So it happened, later that week five hundred strikers from all over the Netherlands, marched to the headquarters of right wing newspaper *De Telegraaf*, Abdelillah's former workplace. As they had done a dozen times before during the strike, they occupied the lobby after train cleaners from Groningen broke through security to hold the doors open.

Swarming the building, they demanded freedom of speech and organisation for cleaners, something a newspaper should value. The cleaners presented a front page for the next day to *De Telegraaf* spokesperson which said they should support the cleaners. The boss of the cleaning company was summoned to the office, as a delegation of cleaners was appointed to do the negotiation. Two hours later, Abdelillah had a new contract. The news of the victory spread amongst the strikers while they were already busy

occupying another lobby. Hundreds of cleaners had just proven how precarity can be overcome. A valuable lesson for everyone, not least for the employer.

In the end it took the cleaners six months of actions and nine weeks of strike to win a new national labour contract, the longest strike in the Netherlands since 1933. They won a 3.5% wage increase, job education, Dutch lessons and benefits for union members. But above all, they fought for recognition and respect. Their chant: "What do we want? Respect! When do we want it? Now". Everyone in the Netherlands now acknowledges the cleaners: they gained massive public support and positive media coverage. They showed the Netherlands that when nobody takes responsibility people become numbers on a budget, creating dynamics that constantly put pressure on their already low working conditions; that is the cost of outsourcing.

In their strike many different backgrounds and ethnicities came together and held each other close. They occupied Utrecht Central Station for six days and nights, singing, dancing, demonstrating, eating and sleeping there. Taking the roof of one of the cleaning companies' headquarters, linking arms during a sit in at the airport defying security and police forces, presenting the drawings of their children to the queen. They overcame the employers' tactics of despair; their willingness to fight seemed endless.

For now the cleaners won a strike for a total workforce of the 150,000 cleaners with only 1,500 active strikers, which shows how much more can be gained with further struggle and unionization. What's most important though is the influence the strike had on other sectors. Straight after the cleaners' victory the garbage collectors of Utrecht and Amsterdam went on an indefinite strike, which ended after one and a half weeks in a 1.5% pay rise for 200,000 municipality workers, breaking the government's wage freeze. It proves that you only stand a chance if you fight, an important lesson for the coming struggle over the massive cuts.

## migrant cleaners and organising solidarity

by David Broder

The recession has seen increasing anti-immigration sentiment in British society, but also many in the labour movement advocating 'keeping our heads down' until the economy picks up – these two factors, combined with the inefficacy of Justice for Cleaners and the concomitant attacks on migrant cleaners' conditions, sharply pose the need for better organisation.

After the partial success of the dispute at Swiss bank UBS in the City of London, it is worth considering the way ahead for the migrant cleaners' campaign, which in its various forms has challenged border controls, casualisation as well as the established unions.

### Political objectives

Often left coverage of migrant and low-paid workers' disputes portrays such workers as 'vulnerable': a word implying not only that they are subject to attacks and abuse from management, but that they are powerless, unable to raise their heads above the parapet. There is an element of truth underlying this – given their casual contractual status and the threat of immigration raids. But cleaners as well as migrants generally are of course divided by different strata of experience, organisation and confidence. It is patronising simply to assume that they are collectively powerless and in need of "our sympathy" as reflected in liberal slogans such as 'I ♥ Migrants'.

Rather, what is important is to create an active dialogue between migrant and non-migrant workers, casually and more stably employed workers, not only to guarantee solidarity with cleaners' disputes but also to channel some of the energy, confidence and political radicalism of the existing struggles into the wider workers' movement.

This requires in particular the sharp advocacy of opposition to all immigration controls, opposition to sectionalism and 'skilled-ism' hostile to migrants, but also focussing on the lessons of particular struggles led by migrants. In reply to charges of patronising behaviour, the left often invoke the idea that there is a collective and historic experience from which to draw lessons: true, but in reality, it is often the so-called 'vulnerable' workers who have the most to teach everyone else.

In this sense the cleaners' dispute at UBS bank was particularly valuable in that it challenged the 'keep your head down' mantra of many unions during the recession. Facing

the second-biggest bank in Europe and without any UNITE union support (such that they could not ballot for industrial action) the cleaners nonetheless stymied management attacks and forced them to stop halfway with their sweeping assault on conditions.

Moreover, a vibrant solidarity network initiated by the Cleaners' Defence Committee brought together over a hundred people, from across trade union, community and political group divides but nonetheless on an explicitly anti-borders and militant class struggle basis. The 'communism' latent in even such a small-scale, short dispute is how it challenges sectional divisions and allows us to look at broad systemic characteristics of the dispute, for example the connection between imperialist rapacity, resultant population movements and the resistance of immigrants in the heartland of finance capital.

### Cleaners and the unions

The T&G attempt to recruit members among cleaners on the London Underground in 2006 – yet in 2008 failing to do anything in support of the RMT-led strike – pointed not only to that union's failings but also the divisiveness of petty squabbles for 'ownership' of a group of workers. We need an alternative to this model.

It is important that we start from working-class reality on the ground. The 'Hands Off My Workmate' conference staged by the SWP in October opted not to discuss existing cleaner campaigns and what is wrong with the unions, but rather to keep the left of the bureaucracy on board with just general anti-racism and anti-BNPism – not even opposition to border controls as such. Even the name 'Hands Off My Workmate' points to the idea that this is a campaign for lecturers, not for migrant workers themselves.

As against such top-down conceptions, some cleaner activists involved in recent campaigns are discussing the desirability of some sort of cleaners' forum existing literally 'above and beyond' unions – both members of UNISON, UNITE, RMT and so on, as well as non-unionised members. This approach has been exemplified in the UBS and Schroeders disputes – demanding the union's organisational, financial and legal backing, but not waiting on this or prioritising union support over grassroots organising itself. This can in part alleviate the problem posed when union inaction undermines the value of the workplace's unionisation, and thus demands a 'political' campaign to force the employer to back down.

Moreover, to shore up workplace organisation and legal rights the Latin American Workers' Association has debated the desirability of a new union or else supporting efforts to create an autonomous space in the IWW. An IWW cleaners' branch has already been created, which will afford cleaners the ability to make decisions for themselves and no longer be burdened by the dead hand of the bureaucracy in unions like UNITE. However, there are still other challenges, for example the small size and operational means of the IWW and the hostility it may face from TUC unions. This initiative is very new and its effectiveness thus remains to be seen, although forthright outside solidarity could help avoid its isolation or marginalisation by more established unions.

### How solidarity is organised

There are already a myriad of community organisations such as those gathered in the Coordinadora Latinoamericana, as well as activist groups whose members are regularly involved in solidarity work, for example Campaign Against Immigration Controls, No Borders, Feminist Fightback and London Coalition Against Poverty. Many activists from these organisations participated in the Cleaners' Defence Committee, which was an ad hoc body, but effective because of its focus on a living dispute involving migrant cleaners.

What is most important is that the cleaners themselves are empowered to take charge of decision-making and the direction of any campaigns and disputes that emerge. The 'base group' concept of organising – whereby activists from 'outside' a given workplace take direct action or carry out practical tasks such as flyering or leaflet production such as cleaners employed there might be afraid to get involved in, but take direction from meetings with the workers 'inside' themselves – is clearly of use here.

Activists 'privileged' in terms of immigration status and nationality, cultural capital, class background and experience should do everything to solidarise with these struggles and make loud and clear the points raised to the whole workers' movement, but without treading on the toes of the cleaners' autonomy in practical terms. We also need to be aware of the risk of taking decisions on behalf of others and merely seeking their consent, rather than engaging in mutual and constructive dialogue. Nonetheless it is important for revitalising the politics of the left and workers' movement in London that the Cleaners' Defence Committee seeks to build on the work already done, draw the lessons of the UBS campaign and bring such support to other workplaces.



# sex workers in uganda organise

★ Since 2008, Uganda's sex workers have been organising to fight for healthcare, safer workplaces, social recognition and protection against systemic police abuse.

This is a group interview with: Macklean Kyomya, 27, a sex worker for more than a decade, who now runs a support network for men and women struggling against discrimination and criminalisation; Namakula Nakato Daisy, the country coordinator for the African Sex Worker Alliance; and Benjamin, a male sex worker in Kampala.

**The sex worker industry in Kampala is very visible, of course, but very secretive too, with many brothels controlled by political and military figures. How do you go about organising workers in the city and what challenges do you face?**

Macklean: We have 360 workers in Kampala involved now, 100 in Gulu, dozens in Mbale and elsewhere. We are young, it's only been two years, there are maybe 12,000 sex workers in Kampala and Wakiso; but word spreads, because ultimately we are helping and supporting each other. If you aren't a sex worker then they won't listen to you or trust. Everyone has been through a lot – rape and beatings – so obviously they think you are after something. And it's tough because people move around a lot – one night they'll be in Kololo, another in Kabalagala.

We do outreach on the streets and people we connect to then spread the network in their areas. Each member is entitled to refer someone to us and we give out small cards. Then we have small meetings, distribute condoms, share information.

We try to spread the message of "my sister's keeper" – solidarity between us all. We can't fight or accuse each other of stealing clients. There are tensions, of course, but the law criminalises all of us so we are on the same side. When you see a sister go off with a man you know is a murderer or beats us, why do you wait till she comes back to tell her of the risk she took? We can work together.

For the workers in the brothels it's harder to get access. And in the slums, many brothels are run by LC2's [Local Council Chairman] and they have influence.

**I'm told it's more dangerous on the streets but women choose the relative freedom rather than being trapped in brothels.**

Macklean: Yes, brothels are in some ways safer. If a man tries to torture or rape in a brothel, the worker screams out and everyone comes, but once a woman is picked up on the streets and goes back to a house or hotel it's more difficult. But women get moved around between brothels. For example, there's a man with brothels in different cities and moves women around. We are trying to do something about him.

Benjamin: A newer thing now – and even the bazungu [white men] are doing it – is just to take people into the bush and that's where a lot of abuse happens.

**Apart from outreach and information sharing, what practical things are being done? Your highest profile campaign last year was against police rape of sex workers in cells after they've been arrested for "prostitution". Middle-class Kampalans claimed to be shocked by the claims.**

Macklean: Ugandans always pretend to be shocked! But they must see what's all around. Yes, the police are a big issue. Our outreach worker was beaten by them recently and we are trying to take the case to court. The police generally are as poor as the workers and survive on sex workers' earnings. So they arrest and then take what they can. And, yes, rape and take advantage of the situation. We try to rescue girls who are arrested by the police. There was another case where the rape happened outside the station but we took the case to the station. The CO [Commanding Officer] at Kabalagala police station says he'll do something but he's protecting his men. But we want to work with the police to reduce the abuse and get access.

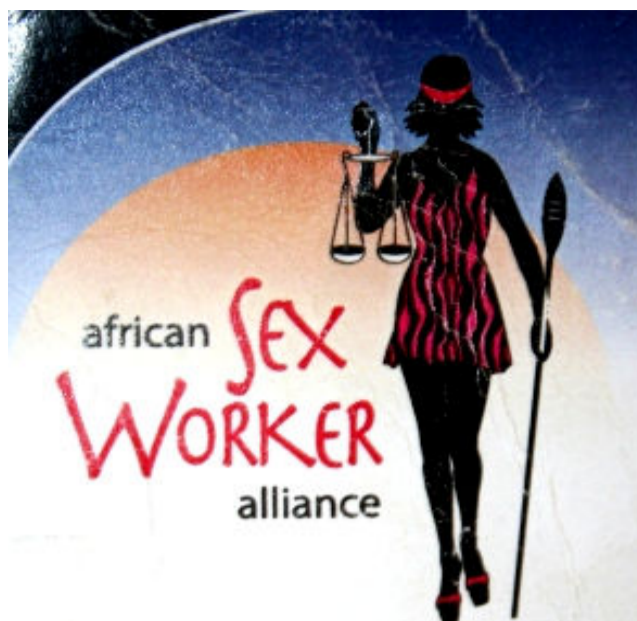
Benjamin: The police make it really hard. They undress you, take your things and threaten you.

**Are clients ever charged by the police?**

Macklean: Never! A man has never been prosecuted. If they catch us both, they take the woman away and leave you.

**What are the difficulties for male sex workers in the city? Homosexuality is also criminalised and homophobic abuse is common in public discussions of sexuality.**

Benjamin: I work in clubs and other [female] sex workers get envious or so you're taking clients so they report you to the bouncers and you get thrown out. Other times there are people who don't like us so they pour beer on you or burn



*people ask us why we do what we do: they should ask themselves what pushes us in that direction.*

you with cigarettes. Since about 2003 it's become harder to operate freely in Bubbles [Irish-themed pub for expatriates], Iguana and Al's Bar.

**How do you stay safe?**

Benjamin: I don't like going to houses. I prefer hotels.

Macklean: It's getting harder. The 2011 elections are coming. The debate is very aggressive. But the politicians are all hypocrites. Even the Pastors! They use us and then the next morning they put on their white robes and preach in church about us.

Daisy: And men sometime say they have taken a man back but thought it was a woman and then beat the worker up.

**What are the informal networks through which workers look out for each other and cooperate?**

Benjamin: Oh, we talk about lots of things. I give advice to other sex workers, younger ones, about what to wear and how to behave. I mean, if you go into Bubbles, you have to behave and be disciplined or the staff will spot you. I also help arrange things for people. I'll say it's \$100 or \$50 with a white man and bring people together.

Macklean: Benjamin also pimps for women in those places.

**What's the situation with healthcare?**

Daisy: We are fighting for that. The obvious problems are STIs and HIV, but also skin problems, lower abdominal pains and things like that. But if you go to the same hospital two or three times in a month, they start to get suspicious.

Macklean: People are desperate for condoms. And many sex workers are also drug users. People lose hope.

**How widespread is condom use? Clients pay more for unprotected sex, don't they?**

Daisy: Yes. Many men want 'live sex' and are silly about condoms.

**You all use the word "sex worker" instead of "prostitute". Why is the difference important?**

Macklean: A sex worker is a positive choice. Workers make choices: where to work, how long to work, what styles of sex we will agree to.

When someone is trafficked underage, that is a prostitute.

Also, the story of prostitutes is always one looking for sympathy – 'I came from the village' – and it's a word to do with sin. It's why religious groups try to 'rehabilitate' us. They give workers 100,000 UgSh [£30] and say 'start a new life'.

Benjamin: But people use it to buy nice clothes! So they indirectly help the industry! For me, 'prostitute' is an abuse really. What the law says.

Macklean: It's an old profession, formed before we born. If you're poor, it's a choice.

Daisy: Talk to most sex workers here and they'll be women trying to pay for the children's' education.

**What are the other options? 80 hours a week in the supermarkets? Rural labour? There are over 100,000 women employed as 'domestics' in middle class households in Kampala – they earn 30,000 UgSh [£10] a month and aren't even allowed to leave the house.**

Daisy: Exactly. There are more and more sex workers. It's much more open now. They keep trying to stop us but the numbers go up. People ask us why we do what we do. They should ask themselves what pushes us in that direction.

## BEYOND RESISTANCE

### A COMMUNIST DAY SCHOOL HOSTED BY THE COMMUNE

Saturday 19th June at the WEA, 96-100 Clifton Street, London EC2. Near Old Street and Liverpool Street tube stations.

£5, £3 concessions. All welcome: see below for session details.

**10:00-11:00: Registration**

**11:00-11:30: Welcome plenary**

**11:30-13:00: Session 1**

- The capitalist crisis

- The changed composition of the working class

- Alienation and the critique of everyday life

**13:00-14:00: Lunch**

**14:00-15:30: Session 2**

- How migrant workers fight back

- Feminism, socialism and political organisation

- Tenants' struggles and community organising

**15:30-15:45: Break**

**15:45-17:15 Session 3**

- Imperialism and the national question

- Struggles over education

- The democratic state and capital

**17:15-18:00: Closing plenary**

- Where next for communists?

We are keen to ensure that people with childcare responsibilities are fully able to attend the event. The venue for the day has no officially licensed crèche space, and we are looking at alternative possibilities. Please do get in touch with us at [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com) as soon as possible so we can discuss arrangements.

Liverpool Street is not being served by the Circle, Metropolitan or Hammersmith and City lines on the 19th so it's best to reach the venue via Old Street (Northern Line Bank branch), or if you're coming from further west, use the Central Line.

The venue is accessible for disabled people.

# ‘to act in union...’

the changing composition of the working class and the implications for class struggle

by Sheila Cohen

The statistics will come later, but in advance of the talk I have been asked to give at The Commune’s summer school, I would like to look at the broader political sweep of how changes in class structure and composition interact – or don’t – with issues of consciousness and resistance.

Mostly the story is one of almost complete unpredictability – a “trend” which should be seen as being to the advantage of those who seek socialist transformation. While the left is often preoccupied with attempting to map out the precise nature of the “epoch” and its relation to possible action on the part of the working class, history teaches us – or should – that such predictions are often worthless. Here, I would like to examine a selection of them.

In the 1870s, an era when Irish workers were the ‘EU migrants’ and were if anything more vilified, a self-described ‘Old Chartist’ wrote, “In our old Chartist times, Lancashire men and women were in rags by the thousands; and many of them often lacked food. But their intelligence was demonstrated wherever you went. You would see them in groups discussing the great doctrine of political justice.

“Now you will see no such groups in Lancashire. But you will hear well-dressed working men talking, as they walk with their hands in their pockets, of ‘Co-ops’ and their shares in them or in building societies”.

The remarks of this (understandably) Grumpy Old Man of over 100 years ago anticipate Lenin’s later analysis of a “labour aristocracy” within the working class consisting mostly of skilled craft workers whose relative privilege removed them from the turbulence and the semi-anarchic revolt which surged up with the New Unionism of the late 1880s. However, even beyond that upsurge, the assumption of an unchanging layer of privilege within the working class was subverted by the end of the 19th century through the increasing encroachment of mechanisation and mass production into the working lives of this layer.

From the semi-“bourgeois” union members and leaders lamented by Marx and Engels (though they refrained from predictions as to their future class consciousness), engineering workers rapidly became, during the upheavals of the pre-war Great Unrest and First World War workers’ committee movements, a quasi-revolutionary vanguard. Even before these dramatic events, engineering workers had begun to form the first effective and lasting forms of workplace organisation, based on the shop steward system of direct representation.

As James Hinton’s book on the First World War shop stewards’ movement notes, this at times quasi-Soviet form of organisation, with its accompanying levels of militancy and class independence, was rooted not only in these workers’ relative deprivation but also in their craft traditions of self-education and reverence for the value of labour. In this way, a consciousness once rooted in comparative privilege is seen as transmuted by a complex process of employer aggression, technological change and a lasting culture of craft pride into the dialectical opposite of an “aristocracy of labour”.

Further examples of startling change from the assumed apathy, weakness and/or “embourgeoisement” of new sections of the working class follow as we advance into the inter-war period. With the growth of mass production industries such as car assembly and, even then, the decline of traditional bastions of “community”-based industries like shipbuilding, a doleful future was predicted for union organisation. Yet the assumption that trade unionism itself would fall at the hurdle of sophisticated “new” industries was once again subverted by the ever-resurgent logic of worker action against intolerable exploitation and employer aggression. In one account of union organisation at Pressed Steel, an Oxford factory supplying the car industry, a participating activist writes of a “spontaneous explosion” of worker resistance and organisation in 1934:

“A day’s work in the huge press shop was a test of endurance...Accident rates were high and no shop stewards existed to take up these matters...In short the workers were an unorganised mob...an apparently docile work force which seemed resigned to...‘free enterprise’...Then to the astonishment of the Pressed Steel management, who thought everything was going admirably, the spontaneous explosion of 1934 happened...180 workers in the press shop walked out. Among [them] were a number of women who played a



sewing machinists striking at the dagenham ford plant in 1968 gave a lead to other women workers

militant and loyal part in the struggle. At first they had no clearly defined demands...The strike was a spontaneous expression of revolt against the ruthless pursuit of profit...

“After some confused discussion among the unorganised strikers someone proposed that a provisional strike committee be elected. *Thus, the traditional form of strike organisation was created before any formal union organisation existed. This was a remarkable illustration that, in essence, the union in no more than the determination of the workers to act in union for the betterment of their conditions of labour*” (emphasis added).

Perhaps predictably, the workers’ action was not supported by the local branch of the AEU, which had a tiny number of skilled workers in the factory; yet, as the writer concludes, the strike committee flourished and “play[ed] an important role in the revival of a working class fighting spirit” dampened by the 1926 betrayal and Labour’s participation in the coalition government of 1931.

This account has been reproduced in some detail because it illustrates so clearly the involvement, strength and courage of many supposedly “unorganisable” workers, including of course women. A similar story of the unionisation of Ford against what was even for the times an exceptionally anti-union management would also demonstrate the key role of Irish workers in that equally brave and apparently impossible attempt.

Perhaps one of the most priceless examples of a subverted prediction of worker docility based on the conception of “affluence” in the mid 1960s is that of Goldthorpe and Lockwood’s extensive study of car workers at Vauxhall’s Luton plant – the so-called “Affluent Worker” series. Having predicted that these supposedly *embourgeoisified* workers, with their cars and private houses, would never exhibit the militancy and solidarity of their traditionally industrial forebears, the worthy sociologists were confronted with a massive strike at the plant – on more or less the date of publication. As on contemporary account relates:

“Rarely can a sociological study...have been so cruelly put to the test. Scarcely one month after the publication of Goldthorpe’s findings... the Luton car workers broke into open rebellion. The workers in whom Goldthorpe had been able to detect ‘little tendency to interpret employer-worker relations in fundamentally “oppositional terms” were responsible for an outbreak reported on p 1 of *The Times*:

‘Near riot conditions developed today at the Luton factory of Vauxhall motors...Two thousand workers streamed out of the factory gates and tried to storm the main offices...The scenes outside [saw] men singing ‘The Red Flag’...Across the road hundreds of men linked arms and prevented a heavy Bedford truck from entering the factory...’(in Blackburn and Cockburn *The Incompatibles*, Penguin 1967, pp48-9).

As Blackburn correctly points out, the sociologists’ analysis failed to take account of the continuing, daily impact of ex-

ploitation in terms of constant pressures on labour costs; pressures which meant, in this example, putting workers on a four day week with 20% less pay and reducing cleaning in the paint shop from weekly to fortnightly, resulting in atrocious conditions. In terms of these incessant and irreducible pressure of capital’s requirements on workers’ lives, it can never be predicted, as Goldthorpe et al were naive enough to do, that workers will not resist.

The carworkers of the post-war period were seen by such commentators as almost a new species of worker, one “instrumental” and “calculative” enough to pragmatically accept the rule of capital. As this example shows, such can never be the case. Yet, despite the ensuing and at times quasi-revolutionary upheavals of the later 1960s and 1970s, it seems that the more “sophisticated” within the Marxist canon are at all times eager to announce the premature death of the proletariat.

Moving on to the 1980s, immediately after the 1978-9 “Winter of Discontent” had swept up large sections of workers in joint strike action, we find Stuart Hall satirising the supposedly Marxist image of the worker as a muscular white man with tools hanging from his belt. Given that his largely Stalinist/Eurocommunist counterparts had already contributed to historian Eric Hobsbawm’s 1979-80 collection, *The Forward March of Labour Halted*, it seems that the cultural theorist should have had no such qualms. In the same year, Andre Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class* completed a triumvirate of sophisticated “Marxist” scepticism as to the enduring nature of a class defined by its production of surplus value for capital.

In an era in which western countries have been fundamentally affected by the victory of neoliberalism and the advance of globalisation, the character of the working class has of course changed massively. Migration, particularly over the last two decades, has increased exponentially due to increased poverty and violence in the always politically oppressed and now abysmally exploited countries of the global south.

Yet, whatever the preponderance of ethnic minorities and women within today’s working class – women now make up half of all trade union members, a historic first - it *remains* demonstrably a working class, as the grotesque super-exploitation of its more “diverse” elements only confirms. Last year’s wildcat strikes among engineering construction workers were notable not only for their lively subversion of the anti-union laws, which remained entirely unchallenged by the government, but also for their support for, and at times involvement by, migrant workers themselves. Like the sewing machinists at Ford whose 1968 strike has been so widely misunderstood as a strike “for equal pay” when it was in fact a grading dispute, these workers were on strike not for some political or nationalistic principle but simply, like workers everywhere, against moves to enhance still further their exploitation by capital.



# second global commune

by Allan Armstrong

The second Global Commune day school, jointly organised by the Republican Communist Network (RCN) and The Commune, was held in the Out of the Blue Centre in Edinburgh on May 22nd. People attended from Aberdeen, Bristol, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London and Midlothian.

The first workshop session, 'After the Election, What Next?' was introduced by Colombian cleaner activist Alberto Durango and Mark Ellingsen from The Commune. Alberto emphasised the necessity for communists to be open and honest about their communism. Workers needed political confidence to attack the labour bureaucracy. Mark pointed out that current economic crisis was far from solved. We need to clearly argue for a revolutionary alternative to capitalism and not be afraid to call for the abolition of wage labour. The question is how do we relate this abstract demand to concrete practice.

The ensuing discussions highlighted that the capitalist class's apparent success in pulling capitalism back from the brink. This stemmed from the political weakness of the working class, and its inability to offer an alternative. The 'return to Labour' in the recent election, and the left's apparent decision to follow, demonstrates this weakness. A successful fightback against the horrendous cuts can not be separated from the need to provide a communist vision.

The second workshop, 'Internationalism from Below – A Communist Perspective' was introduced by Allan Armstrong of the RCN and David Broder of the commune. Allan summarised *The Communist Case for Internationalism from Below* which he had already circulated. He contrasted 'internationalism from below' with two other approaches to the national question found on the left – the confederalist and the cosmopolitan. He pointed out the relevance of an 'internationalism from below' approach in the current world of corporate imperialism, and how it linked with our struggles to create a new global commune. David based his talk on *The Earth is not Flat*, his critique of the Anarchist Federation's *Against Nationalism*.

Two follow-up discussion groups dealt with different aspects of the issue. Members of The Commune asked how it was possible for the RCN to argue for an independent Scotland without getting tangled up in nationalism, and indeed how relevant is the issue when the majority of workers don't support independence. RCN members highlighted their break up of the UK political strategy with its opposition to the US/British imperial alliance, which currently enforces corporate capitalist rule over the globe. They also pointed to the undeclared nationalism of the British left. The other workshop emphasised the necessity to update our analysis of imperialism and the continued use of chauvinism and racism in creating a two-tier workforce with super-exploited migrant labour. The issue of federation was also discussed in relation to states and to communist organisation.

The third workshop, 'How Communists Should Organise' was introduced by Chris Ford of The Commune, with Ellenor from Liberty and Solidarity giving her apologies for being unable to attend and speak. Chris had already circulated a paper, *Communists Must Organise As Communists*. He drew on historical evidence to show that The Commune should be moving to a more advanced form of organisation, in effect, a new league of communists.

In the discussion groups there was agreement about the need for a federal form of organisation, and an acknowledgement that communist recomposition is a constant process not a single organisational act. Some possible organisational forms which could be adopted by The Commune were discussed. The need to acknowledge tendencies or platforms was recognised. Furthermore, after many comrades' experience of the left, the need for more freedom in a communist organisation than in capitalist society was emphasised!

Two comrades, who were members of neither the RCN nor The Commune, actively participated over the day and declared their wish to join up. Due to conflicting events, the RCN will only be able to send one representative to The Commune's June 19th day school in London, but hope to send a larger group in September. Once again, participants felt it had been a very worthwhile day, both politically and socially.

★The next three pages feature articles in response to the papers presented to the day school and its themes of discussion. See online for original contributions.

# no nationalist solutions

by Clifford Biddulph

In the *Earth is not Flat* (see issue 14), David Broder argued that the aim of getting rid of capitalism by class struggle is too abstract in the face of some forms of nationalism. For David, nationalism which is a reaction to imperialism cannot be sidestepped or simply opposed by communism.

This seems to be the Leninist point about two kinds of nationalism: those of oppressed, and oppressor, nations. A limited extension of popular democracy or the sovereignty of an oppressed nation can be supported. This, although David does not entirely share the orthodox Leninist position of unconditional support for the self-determination of nations.

But David does go on to say, contrary to the anti-statist platform of The Commune, that in Colombia the state does not represent the long term interests of the bourgeoisie, implying that some form of anti-imperialist nationalist state could be progressive or in some sense represent the proletariat or be a transition stage to communism. In his own words, a government of state capitalist development would undermine imperialism. The implication is that in some circumstances communists can be nationalists. Nationalism, he claims is not tied to the bourgeoisie. This is not surprising since in *The Earth is not Flat* he tends to reduce class struggle to trade unionism or so called 'economism'.

Allan Armstrong of the Republican Communist Network believes that nationalism is too important to be left to the nationalists. Hence RCN's support for Scottish independence. Small state nationalism is dressed up in a slogan: internationalism from below. The RCN stands for internationalism, but until that is achieved more limited federations of states based on the break-up of imperialist states or, to use the slogan, 'internationalism from below'.

A form of nationalism is presented as the way forward, and true internationalism is paradoxically based on nationalism. Allan's republicanism is thus a timeless ideal free of class determination, social and historical context. Internationalism from below floats through history, appearing now as Levellers then as Chartists then again as United Irishmen, John MacLean or the resistance to the poll tax.

But it is not the class struggle between capital and labour that is abstract, but the concept of nation. What is a nation? There is no satisfactory definition and concepts of what constitutes a nation have changed throughout recent history. Is a nation a subjective feeling of identification? In which case there could be endless fragmentation with any significant group of people declaring themselves a nation. Is it unity around a capitalist free market area? Is it unity stuck together with language or religion? Yet there have been multi-language and religious states. Is it a shared culture despite class antagonism? It is not ethnic unity, that is just a myth. There are always exceptions to any check list, and no clear objective and consistent answer. Many modern nation states originated in lines drawn on a map: in short, nationalism is a bourgeois ideology.

The national bourgeois state is a machine of oppression directed against workers. As Roman Rosdolsky put it: "the working class have no nation. We cannot take from them something they have not got." The modern state is a product of bourgeois development. In a class society there is no homogenous national culture or community. And the nation state has a capitalist tendency to become non national or imperialist. In that sense there is no fundamental difference between nationalisms. Vietnam was oppressed by American imperialism until 1975, but then four years later became the oppressor of Cambodia.

In the words of Marx from his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, political rights cannot rise above the economic structure of society. Class interest determines the nature of capitalist society. The idea of a general right to self determination is utopian. Communists cannot support all national demands, as in some circumstances self-determination would be against the interests of the working class. Marx did not apply a general right of self determination but supported some forms of nationalism from a strategic and tactical point of view, for example supporting Polish nationalism as a check to Russian reaction. But as a speaker at a meeting of the First International said: Russia was not the only country or nationalism that needed checking.

Marx had a check list of what he described as viable nations such as Hungary, Italy and Germany, nationalism which would establish a nation state and capitalist development and the growth of the working class. But German unity was not on the basis of revolutionary democracy from

below but conservative unity from above imposed by Prussia. Allan refers to Marx and Engels as if they were one person, but there are important differences in their approach to the national question and other issues such as philosophy. Engels followed Hegel in his notion of non-historic peoples. Both friends made errors of judgment. Some supposedly 'non-viable' peoples established nation states. Riazanov, whose knowledge of Marxism Lenin feared, thought Marx's obsession with Tsarist Russia as the main danger missed the main danger: the developing antagonism between Germany and Britain over colonies which led to the imperialist war. Some of their political perspectives on nationalities seem at odds with what we understand by historical materialism. Engels' comments on Germany's civilising mission were used by Social Democrats to justify support for the first imperialist war.

Lenin did not adhere to the general principle of the right of nations to self determination. He accepted the conquest of Georgia and Ukraine following the Russian revolution. The Bolsheviks considered the self determination in these areas was counter revolutionary or against the international interests of the working class. The revolution and social development did not unfold as Lenin expected. The Russian revolution was not a bourgeois democratic revolution as he had long predicted. The slogan for the 'right of nations to self-determination' was based on Karl Kautsky's schemas, whereby such a right was premised on the political sphere of bourgeois democracy. It was precisely this bourgeois-democratic content Lenin supported.

But the schema was based on the separation of economics and politics. When Rosa Luxemburg said imperialism economically shaped nations, Lenin denounced her views as 'economistic'. But how could there be political emancipation without economic emancipation? The independence of many ex-colonial nations has tended to be formal and has prevented rather than facilitated communism. The assumption was that political democracy would provide the widest conditions for the working class to fight the class war. But the western nation state was not replicated in China and elsewhere. Nationalism in Turkey and China in the 1920s did not lead to a form of revolutionary democracy, but to the destruction of the communist workers' movement.

Lenin was in favour of 'temporary' alliances with bourgeois nationalists in China and elsewhere. This compromise undermined the independence of the workers' movement. The aim was not directly the overthrow of capitalism. How temporary was 'temporary'? The position was full of ambiguities and inconsistent and implied a transitional historical stage. So counter-revolutionaries were described as objective revolutionaries. Why would the sons of Chinese landlords, as officers in the Kuomintang national army, tolerate revolutionary activity by peasants and workers? A temporary truce between workers' internationalism and nationalism was not possible.

The right of nations to self-determination, which Lenin borrowed from bourgeois nationalism, assumes the world is flat or all nations could be formally equal. According to Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg did not grasp the fact that Asia had yet to have its bourgeois democratic revolution and he strongly denied that nations demanding equal rights would lead to the proliferation of small states. Provided communists did not advocate separation, as the RCN do for Scotland, self-determination would result in very large states and federations. In Lenin's opinion workers should always stand for the larger state. But has history demonstrated the truth or falseness of Lenin's view? Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been the emergence of numerous small states. There has been no internationalism from below or small state internationalism.

We can ask the question Rosa Luxemburg once asked. Where is the nation in which the people have had the right to determine the form and content of their national political and social existence? It is only when capitalist exploitation is ended that the oppression of one nation by another can be ended. This was the implication of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution which attempted to address the uneven nature of capitalist social development. The working class would become the leading class of the nation in the sense of the *Communist Manifesto*: national in form only, as in 1917 which was a year of international, not national, revolution.

The ideology of nationalism is historically novel and the majority of people once lived without it. Nationalism had an historical beginning and as far as communists are concerned it will have an end. The communist objective is to liberate humanity, not liberate nations.



# ‘not another communist group!’

by Oisín Mac Giollamóir

I suppose the first issue with the idea of a communist re-foundation is the question: is it needed? Surely, there are enough organisations as it is. Surely, the real problem for the working class is not the lack of communist organisations, but rather the lack of working class militancy, organisation and confidence.

And true enough, there are enough communist organisations in Britain. There are even more than enough libertarian communist organisations[1]. So why another? There have been enough left unity initiatives, all of which have failed. So please god, not another! And why even bother with setting up another communist group when the real problem is the lack of working class militancy, organisation and confidence. What can another group do for us?

## We don't need just another group

Personally, I have no interest in yet another communist organisation competing with other groups, pushing its oh-so-unique political product. But that said, there is, I think, a need for libertarian communists to organise together. There is a need for communists to get together, analyse together, reach conclusions together and act together. Although of course communist organisation has its hazards.

There is a tendency for communist groups, especially in times of low class struggle, to act like sects. Instead of trying to aid the development of the working class as a revolutionary subject, these groups assume the voice of the missing working class subject and speak for it. And with that the group substitutes itself for the class either in theory, practice or both.

The group appreciates the revolutionary role that can only be played by the working class, but conflates its politics for the politics of the class. Thus it takes nothing more seriously than the defence and propagation of its own particular ideas. The endless denunciation of other left groups as reformist, leftist, nationalist, bourgeois, Stalinist, social-democratic, ultra-left etc. is viewed not as petty sectarianism but instead, as protecting the true politics of the working class (i.e. the politics of the group) from pollution. This tendency leads nowhere but the obscurity of the magazine shelves at the back of Housmans socialist bookshop.

**“The basis of any new organisation must be a commitment to a new and different political culture. We need a culture of comradeship, a spirit of questioning and an understanding that our political activity is to aid our class's political development.”**

I have no interest in 'defending' some politics or tradition, and have no interest in setting up yet another group to pursue this aim. This form of politics does not benefit the working class and is separated from it. The working class is not an ideal form; it does not have an ideal politics to defend. The working class is the class of wage labour. And the struggle of the working class is the struggle against wage labour.

Today, that struggle is fragmented, dispersed and, in truth, largely absent. But the abolition of wage labour and the achievement of communism will only come about through the efforts of the class of wage labour to destroy wage labour. Working-class politics comes from class struggle and class struggle only. There is no working-class politics outside the class struggle and as such all political activity of communists should always be subservient to the class struggle. The politics of the working class come from *that* struggle and *not* from the inky pronouncements of the left.

## The need for strategy

So if that is so, why is The Commune here? Why do we produce this paper? Why are we calling for a communist recomposition? Because we are of this class of wage labour, because we are committed to our collective struggle against wage labour and because we think that this struggle cannot develop without us becoming conscious of our struggle, what challenges it faces, what opportunities it has. We are here because we have a question that needs answering: How do we proceed?

It is not that we know the answer. We don't. But we know that it is a question that needs to be asked and that needs



*the spanish revolution was defeated: “strong principles and fine slogans do not act as a substitute for strategic thinking”*

to be answered. We cannot depend on pre-political spontaneity[2]. Nor can we depend on received wisdom. Nor can we depend on the insights of our principles and slogans. None of these are enough.

Too often at crucial points in history libertarian communists have been caught on the hoof. In the Russian revolution, the lack of organisation and preparedness let the soviets degenerate into the Stalinist one-party state. In the German revolution, 'council communism' had to be invented *during* a revolution. In Spain, the anticipatable problems of coordinating with anti-revolutionary progressive forces lead the revolution to a slow and murderous gradual defeat. The lesson is there to be learnt. Strong principles and fine slogans do not act as a substitute for strategic thinking.

As the Friends of Durruti group argued after the defeat of May 1937 a successful revolution “hinges upon two essential points which cannot be avoided. A program, and rifles” and the downward spiral of the Spanish revolution “must be attributed exclusively to the absence of a specific program and short-term achievements”. The struggle of the working class will not end in libertarian communism unless libertarian communist workers think about the path that must be taken, develop a strategy and follow it.

Of course no group on the left today has the 'correct programme' and no group ever will. The revolutionary programme arises from struggle. It is always provisional. It is never correct but it is based on the attempt of us as members of our class, the class of wage labour struggle, to answer the question: How do we proceed?

Our task is then this. We should aim for a communist recomposition not to get people into an organisation, but to open up the space for asking this question: How do we proceed?

This call to ask questions is not some communist philosophical puzzle. Rather it is a call to a specific task. It is a call for a communist recomposition. We need to first create the space for the asking and answering of questions. Secondly, we need to ask the question: how do we proceed? And third we need to answer it.

## First, we need a new culture...

In order to create a space for the asking and answering of questions, we need to not only declare a break from the sectarianism of the left we need to make that break. And that means changing how we act. We can't look to only those around us. We need to reach out to other libertarian communists and ask for debate and discussion. So far The Commune has been reasonably successful in this. We have hosted joint meetings with a variety of groups such as the Republican Communist Network, the Anarchist Federation and a forthcoming meeting with the Marxist-Humanist Initiative. We also have members who come from a number of

differing political traditions. But we need to be even more vigorous and persistently outward looking. We need to try to invite contributions to our paper from other groups and non-members and widen the debate about communist recomposition.

We need to restrain from the old debating style of dismissing, undermining and ridiculing arguments. Instead we need to learn to bite our tongue, wait and listen to each other, try to understand each other's arguments before we decide to agree with them or not.

## ...second, we need to ask how we proceed...

In our debates and discussions we should learn from history, theory and experience. We should face our differences honestly and openly aiming not at proving each other wrong but at working out how to advance the interests of our class. We should ask, looking at our struggles, our experiences, the state of current class relations domestically and internationally, how should we proceed?

This article has not touched on the actual practice involved in class struggle. Nor has it addressed in any depth or concreteness what a communist organisation should do to aid the class struggle. But this is an important debate and it is where we should be focused.

## ...finally, we need to answer.

This process of asking questions should not be an aimless process, but rather it should lead somewhere. We should not be debating for the sake of it, or just so that we all learn each other's respective beliefs. Rather we should be having a debate in order to reach agreement. Perhaps not perfect agreement, but enough to go forward. Exactly what that next step in communist recomposition is not, as yet, clear; it should be decided through our common debate.

How this agreement is reached is obviously still up for debate. In these pages Chris Ford has suggested that we quickly proceed to setting up a 'Communist League' in which different organisations could, at least initially, maintain their independence. I think it is too quick, we need further discussion and we need to reach out to groups that are close to us politically but have not as of yet been in anyway involved in the discussion of communist recomposition.

My suggestion would be that those of us in The Commune make an overt and conscious effort to reach out to every group in Britain that we believe has politics that are covered by our platform and try to include them in the debate. This might happen through holding joint meetings or forums, by inviting them to speak at our meetings, speaking at their meetings or inviting contribution to the paper. This process should lead up to a congress of the various groups and unaligned individuals in perhaps in December or January to discuss how to proceed.

As agreement is reached, and as organisation develops, there will surely be disagreement and some may part ways with the process. If and when this happens we should not treat them with the hatred rightfully reserved only for the splitters of the Popular Front of Judea. As I said above, we should avoid at all costs sect like activity. We should always aim for comradeship with working class communist militants regardless of our political differences. The basis of any new organisation must be a commitment to a new and different political culture. We need a culture of comradeship, a spirit of questioning and an understanding that our political activity is to aid our class's political development and as such any organisation must always be subservient to the wider interests of the class.

[1] I am using the term 'libertarian communist' to refer to those who, like The Commune, “reject statist and authoritarian visions of socialism and look instead to the tradition of 'socialism from below', which believes that emancipation can only be achieved through the activity, self-organisation and mobilisation of the working class” and who aim for 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.” While the term 'libertarian communist' might be contested and might not be accepted by all members of The Commune, it is the term used to amalgamate anti-statist pro-self management forms of communism and as such I will use it throughout this article to refer to The Commune's politics.

[2] I use 'pre-political' here to qualify what kind of spontaneity I am referring to, not to describe all forms of spontaneity.



# we lack resistance to the present

by Nic Beuret

There have been a number of articles in recent issues of *The Commune* reflecting on what kind of organisation it should be. Indeed, many on the radical left have returned to questions of organisation as a result of the decline and dispersal of the protests and projects of the 'networked' anti-globalisation movement.

Somewhat surprisingly, there is a great deal of agreement across the political spectrum that the purpose and function of political organisation is to produce propaganda, agitate, debate and discuss. Thus the left wing version is stuck in a loop of newspapers and websites, debates and conferences. Almost universally, the question of politics is posed as one of communication, and political organisation as bringing together people with the same political understanding to set ideas into motion; to create a like-minded movement through common political positions and analysis.

But a rupture in the consensus of what constitutes politics is not only necessary but urgent: our point of departure needs to start from the question of organising within moments of resistance and existing conflict, and it is only from there that we can move to the circulation of theory and ideas.

The circulation of ideas, the creation of spaces for debate and discussion, and analysing current configurations of events are all essential elements for the development and growth of movements, especially movements that are antagonistic to capital. But they are not enough in and of themselves: their value is in their operation within such existing movements. Antagonism needs bodies that feel the necessity to act. What follows is the need to start from moments of resistance and move towards ideas through a reflectivity to that resistance.

For moments of resistance to become a movement they need to exist as more than just a series of isolated events and incidents. They need to become common – with a shared language of struggle and collective vision for the future. There are some who view this common as ever-present, waiting to emerge with the right objective conditions. But this perspective operates from a location outside the multitude looking in. At its worst this means that radical political ideas are seen as necessarily imported into a site of struggle to produce a political common – either through some form of education (by a vanguard of left wing militants or intellectuals) or, conversely, existing as some kind of impediment to the *real* movement (as is the view of much of the ultra-left).

**“People are well aware that they suffer. What they do not necessarily know is that this can be changed, that together we can resist. To resist is not to rescue or to save the other – people must take the first steps of their own revolt.”**

However, objective conditions do not necessarily breed revolt, and revolt can occur even when people have 'bread, and roses too'. Objective conditions are at best an indication of the potentiality and location of struggle, and not a barometer of the high or low levels of resistance, let alone a guarantee of shared or collective resistance.

Social movements that can bring about the necessary resistances capable of creating a sustainable common future are built through our actions. Many revolutionary groups make the mistake of seeing themselves as something apart from the multitudes, holding some kind of special knowledge that others do not. And because of this they see their task not as to organise or resist, but to either rescue, save, help, educate or commentate on the actions of others.

Yet people on the radical left are not separated from the multitudes, and neither hold privileged information nor have access to something others do not. They hold a critical perspective on capitalism and the state, and a view that a radical transformation is needed – to create a new world in place of the old. The question is, how does this perspective come about – how is an anti-capitalist perspective made?

## Proximity

Wherever there is resistance there is power; wherever there is power there is resistance, however hidden. Acts of resistance occur when people feel compelled to act and either take action or seek out others to act with. A single action becomes something more when somebody else sees their

own desires to resist reflected in the actions or words of others. The crucial element here is proximity – how close is the act of defiance? Here I am not talking of physical distance, but something less tangible – of the distance between lives and experiences. By this I mean workplace experiences, cultural differences, functions of the state and other social-religious institutions, as well as personal distances such as friendship networks and community ties ('imaginary' or not). Proximity allows for the creation of a common – both a common enemy or problem and a common language to organise collectively through.

Individual resistance becomes a collective struggle when people are moved to act collectively on a common problem through a common language. The problem doesn't have to be a simple or singular thing – it can be a threat (nursery closures), a systemic problem (climate change), a workplace struggle (a restructuring), or any other issue. Language does not have to be a matter of words – occupations are a common language for many students, strikes for many workers. What is clear though is that the problem has to be sufficiently deeply and commonly felt.

Proximity, as well as allowing for the development of the common, allows for the organisation of resistance. To struggle in a workplace, you need people in that workplace to struggle together to be effective. To struggle against public service cuts, you have to all be living under the same governmental regime. Proximity is inscribed on the terrain of struggle, and is different for each problem we face. Through common problems and a common language, collective struggle becomes possible.

## The anarcho-syndicalist contribution

“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of their oppression, not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation they can transform. This perception is necessary, but not a sufficient condition by itself for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action”

(Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Proximity, terrains and commons are necessary for collective resistance but not enough. People also need to understand that the world can change through their actions. Merely knowing something is not enough to bring action, nor does knowing you are oppressed necessarily mean you understand you can change things. We learn about power, oppression and ourselves through our acts of defiance.

A useful contribution to our understanding of how people make the shift from understanding to action comes from the history of anarcho-syndicalism, as Nappalos shows in his paper *The anarchosyndicalist contribution to the theory of revolutionary consciousness*. Nappalos makes four important points.

The first is that people are radicalised through struggle: by understanding they can change their situation through action. It is only through struggling, or being in proximity to somebody struggling, that we can know that we can change the world.

The second is that consciousness is formed not only from within the hegemonic ideas of the time (borne from the dominant power structures) but also from within the activities and social organisation of the multitude. The self-activity of the multitude generates consciousness through the construction of other ways of being. Our daily experiences of life outside of exchange and oppression teach us about other ways of being in the world.

The third is that our organisations and institutions of resistance – our organs of struggle – provide the deepest anti-capitalist education. By building our collective power in the pursuit of our common interests, and through a common language we start the project of creating the *visible* possibility of another world, a possibility that people can both see and live here and now.

Finally – and with this point we return to the questions of proximity and the common – the history of anarcho-syndicalism shows us that “revolutionary ideas cannot be artificially planted. Workers become receptive when these concepts are confirmed and reflected in their own experience.” (Dolgoft, *The American Labour Movement: A New Beginning*).

## Towards an anti-capitalist movement

On a terrain where there are a multitude of struggles existing together in proximity, the development of ideas through a common language reflecting people's experiences would

be a strong contribution to the development of a communist movement.

But the moment we are scattered, disconnected and not in a position of strength. The task at hand is not to throw our energy into the development of an already existing movement, but to create the possibility of the movement itself.

Here we should note the anarcho-syndicalist contribution also states that collective resistance is not enough. There are limitations to basic local struggles: a moment of transition from the local to the global is needed. There is a current of thought on the radical left that sees the development of a revolutionary consciousness as something that comes spontaneously. Yet more often than not workplace struggles or community resistance campaigns do not result in revolutionary militancy. Most of the time struggles remain located within their terrain, not transcending the limits of the context (the wage claim, service provision, etc). If spontaneous movement from the local struggle to the global fight is rare, then what hope can we have for an anti-capitalist movement?

If we reject the idea that spontaneity will ever be enough then we are left with the need to create bridges from specific moments of resistance to a bigger, broader struggle: from any one workplace or community struggle to the necessity of an anti-capitalist movement. And this is where we come back to the role of radical left groups.

## Communists like us: notes on organising

The function of radical left organisations in periods where we are weak as a class is to be involved in creating the possibility of the movement. We do this both through direct involvement in struggle and by providing a space for the development of a collective vision, created through discussion, debate and reflection. To circulate and generate ideas is the second step however – first we need to build collective power through specific struggles from within the terrains we find ourselves. It is from there we can start to create a common language and collective vision of our future as it emerges from our daily experiences. This is the lesson the Zapatistas tried to teach us prior to the cycle of summit protests: a lesson we failed sufficiently to learn. Our principal relationship has to be to struggle. Only then can we start the process of debate and discussion, within a specific set of experiences and terrains.

And this brings us back to the question of organisation. A pluralist form is one that will allow the maximum collective organising effort without falling into some kind of substitutionism or vanguardism. If we start from our own lives, then we can avoid such pitfalls.

And if we have no single 'organisational line' but construct our vision for the future through a common language borne of our collective struggles, then we will avoid the folly of seeing ourselves as bringing the 'truth' to other people's struggles, or able to educate people as to the reality of their oppression. People are well aware that they suffer. What they do not necessarily know is that this can be changed, that together we can resist. To resist is not to rescue or to save the other – people must take the first steps of their own revolt. Insofar as we resist, there remains an ongoing question of the balance between autonomy and solidarity.

We start with our desires and the possibilities of other ways of living created through our struggles. From these we are able to articulate a vision of another world that reflects people's own desires and experiences. But that will come with time. For now, we need to be able to start to organise and work to initiate struggles. We need to collectively organise around potential sites of conflict close to us. We also need to choose those spaces that open up the possibility of alternatives where we can act collectively through our experiences. And we need to develop a common language based in the terrains in which we resist, able to reflect both our collective experiences and describe a common vision of the future.

Revolution is a transition, not a sudden rupture, and the alternatives we develop in the here and now will form the basis of the new world. My view is that unless we move beyond the wage and workplace struggles into the spaces of social reproduction – essentially the transformation of social and public services, as well as those 'essentials' such as energy, housing and food – we will not be in a position to transcend capitalist social relations, but merely to improve our lot within them, which history shows us to mean at the expense of others.

Regardless though, it is through organising and developing these alternatives that we will build a communist movement, and it is as an organising network that we should go forward.



# 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.

## upcoming events around Britain

★Beyond Resistance: The Commune's summer school. From 11am to 6pm on Saturday 19th June at WEA, 96-100 Clifton St, London EC2 (five mins from Old St/Liverpool St tube stops). Visit our site at [thecommune.co.uk](http://thecommune.co.uk) for details.

★London: We have organising meetings in the capital every three weeks. Email us at [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com) for date and venue details.

The next public forum is to be jointly held with Marxist-Humanist Initiative. This discussion on 'What must be changed in order to transcend capitalism?' will be led off by Andrew Kliman and Anne Jaclard. From 7pm on Monday 5th July, at WEA, 96-100 Clifton St, London EC2

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 the topic of 'market socialism', will be held from 6pm on Sunday 27th June at Cafe Kino, Ninetree Hill, Bristol. See website for suggested reading.

★Sheffield: we have monthly communist discussion forums. Call Barry on 07543 652629.

★North-West: the next Manchester Class Struggle Forum is due to be held in July. For details contact Mark on 07976 386737.

★West Midlands: call Dave on 02476 450027.

★Wrexham: contact Steve by email at [redlantern21@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:redlantern21@yahoo.co.uk).

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