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the ★ commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below issue 17, september 2010 £1

spectre of communism haunts china's rulers

Adam Ford reports on recent upheavals in China

With the US empire in terminal decline, the Chinese economy has become essential to the globally integrated capitalist economy. China is now the world's second largest economy, having officially overtaken its neighbour Japan, with a gross domestic product of over a trillion US dollars in the second quarter of 2010. It has long enjoyed gargantuan economic growth, and even weathered the storm of the global economic crisis up to this point. But its status as “sweatshop of the world” now seems extremely vulnerable to both internal and external shocks, and a period of huge social upheaval is on the horizon.

China is currently a few decades into its ‘industrial revolution’, which is similar to those undergone by European states a couple of centuries ago. However, there are a couple of important differences. Firstly, the nation is of course playing host to far more technologically advanced production than the Britain of the 1800s. Secondly, the sheer scale of China as a land mass, and the size of the new Chinese proletariat – estimated to be around 400 million and steadily growing – means that it dwarfs that of any other country. International capital now relies on Chinese workers to manufacture a large percentage of its electronics, cars, and clothing at super-exploitative pay rates.

But this summer there have been encouraging signs that this enormous proletariat is starting to feel its objective strength. In June, a wave of suicides at the Foxconn plant at Shenzhen provoked riots amongst workers, who stopped making iPhones for Apple in miserable conditions, and started chanting “capitalists kill people”, while brandishing photos of the company's CEO. The company responded by announcing wage rises and improved conditions, though these soon proved to be illusory, and the *China Times* reported that many workers are now even worse off than before, thanks to changes in the pay structure.

Workers at the Denso car parts factory in southern China seem to have enjoyed more success, brought about by their two day strike over the quality of breakfasts. But perhaps the pivotal standoff of the upsurge was at the Honda Lock plant in Zhongshan, which followed hard on the heels of another victorious Honda strike in Foshuan. While the exact numbers are



china crisis: summer 2010 has seen major strike movements

unclear – they are quite possibly being suppressed by authorities – Honda Lock workers seem to have won a raise of at least 100 yuan, which is around one tenth of their previous wage.

Zhongshan workers faced down management threats and riot police on their way to the victory. But perhaps more interesting than this was the structure of their ad hoc organization. Feeling unrepresented by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) – which openly acts as an arm of the Communist Party dictatorship – they took collective decisions and elected recallable delegates to set out their demands. So in Western terms, this summer's Chinese strikes have very definitely been ‘wildcats’ – taken independently of the trade union bureaucracy, which has been identified as a class enemy. “The official union leaders are useless and support management”, as one Foshuan striker told the *Financial Times*.

A *China Newsweek* profile of the man identified as the Foshuan strike ‘leader’ paints a portrait that could easily apply to tens of millions of young Chinese workers. Aged just twenty-four, Tan Ziqing left his family's small farm six years ago, and earns takes home 1,300 yuan a month (about £120). Apart from his living expenses, he sends the bulk of his wages back to his family in Hunan province. “Living almost like a monk”, his only entertainment was online chat. More educated than many, Tan researched previous working class struggles, such as the abortive Chinese revolution of the 1920s. He decided that independent working class action was required at the Honda factory.

Tan initiated the strike with a co-worker on 17th May, and the news spread

quickly, via text messages. Having decided that a management concession of 55 yuan per month was not enough, the workers resumed their strike on the 23rd. They rallied on the factory's basketball court and sang *the Internationale*.

Despite the Communist Party's attempts to censor the internet, the strikes generated a lot of chat on various online forums. The mainly young workers at factories owned by Honda and Foxconn are part of the peak internet-using demographic in China, so many young people would have sympathized with their plight. Commenting on the Foxconn suicides, one worker claimed that that people like them faced only three possibilities: “revolution, suicide, or dragging on”.

There is also much condemnation of the official “yellow unions” whose bureaucrats enjoy “mansions, US dollars, fine wine and beautiful women”, while young workers “labour endlessly like robots in a bird cage for a minimum wage”. A blogger urged workers to: “Rise up, those who do not want to be slaves... the rights of the workers all over the world were won by workers' strikes, bloodsheds and sacrifices! Not granted from the conscience of the capitalists.”

Even though these strikes have been relatively isolated, fears are now being expressed in financial circles that they may just mark the beginning. Indeed, Bloomberg's columnist William Pesek made the slightly tongue in cheek remark that “If these factory strikes continue, China may have to go communist.” He then posed the vital question: “... will workers demand a true communism, not just one that abhors Google?”

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a movement against cuts?

by Steve Ryan

So, the cuts continue, and every day new tales of slash and burn emerge from London Fire Brigade through the NHS to the Ministry of Justice.

The left claim that this is the worst attack since the 1970s: depressingly the response is very far from that of the 1970s.

The 1970s were probably a heyday in union power and influence. A powerful network of shop stewards committees, a politicised work force and a responsive TUC led to significant victories and successes from miners' strikes to the release of jailed activists such as the Pentonville Five, dockers imprisoned for ‘contempt of court’.

Trade union membership was at an all time high. The influence of far left groups was also way above that of today. 2010 however sees low union membership, a TUC that is in hoc to New Labour as are the big unions such as UNITE whose leaders played down strike action this week, even saying cuts were needed!

Whilst the more radical PCS and RMT are calling for action at the TUC this is unlikely to be supported. In the meantime the left as always revert to type, calling demos to pressure the TUC into doing something, anything...



we need unity of service users and workers against cuts

Pretty grim is it not? Well yes, with little fight back from union and labour movement leaders, few anti cuts groups springing up, it does look bad.

However, all is not lost. The fact is that anti cuts groups are springing up as the scale of the cuts hits home. As the cuts begin to bite this process will quicken.

Similarly workers are beginning to sense what is coming after a languid summer. This at some stage will turn to anger, not just with the government but with union leaders, especially if some unions do take militant action.

The ConDem coalition is clearly weak as well, with clear splits showing and the Lib Dems in turmoil.

Clearly anti-cuts groups need initiating in as many communities as possible, and as these grow they need to federate as with the anti-Poll Tax movement.

This will allow co coordinated actions, stunts etc. these groups MUST be non sectarian, horizontal in organisation and inclusive but militant.

So what should communists be doing?

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solidarity with the miners' strike in ukraine

by Chris Kane

A major dispute is underway between mineworkers in Poltava in central Ukraine and Ferrexpo Plc, a major player on the global market mainly engaged in mining of iron ore. All three shifts in the open cast in the town of Komsomolsk, of more than 300 workers each are now involved in industrial action. Some railway locomotive drivers and workers on the iron ore concentrating factory have joined in solidarity.

The action started on 1st August at 10am when the workers at the ore-dressing open cast pit started at first with a go-slow and work-to-rule. The action began when haul trucks drivers on their way down to the 305 meter deep quarry reduce speed of the vehicles from normal 40-45 km/h to the more safe 10-15 km/h. Excavator and bulldozer operators, as well as drilling technicians then joined the action in solidarity. Within 24 hours of the workers' action total rock production had fallen by less than 60% of normal volume. This impact of the workers resistance is continuing.

The cause of the dispute was a recent re-evaluation of workplaces which led to the opencast mine workers being moved from the '1st list' (which implies heavy-load conditions) to the '2nd list'. This means abolition of a number of benefits:

- ★ the retirement age will be lifted from 50 to 55 years;
- ★ required working life will be increased from 20 to 25 years;
- ★ required length of service at heavy-load workplaces – from 10 to 12.6;
- ★ 10 days will be cut from annual holiday entitlement

Evaluation is done every 5 years; after the previous one, workers kept their 'first list'. Since then their trucks became older, while the mine grew even deeper. Despite the fact that the certification of job hazard categories is in contravention of Ukrainian law all legal means to contest it led to protracted and unresolved cases in the courts.

Over the last year the management has used lies and blackmail to increase production rates; however each time rates were raised at the end of the month the workers were left without their deserved bonuses. To fulfill quotas, truck drivers routinely have to transgress the legal speed limit. Until recently, the highest speed has been 25-32 km/h (depending on the make of vehicle), while truck drivers have to drive at 40-45 km/h.

The company still considered production was growing too slowly. The company used this to deny workers their bonuses. The bonus in question could reach 1000 UAH which is a significant proportion of the average wage (4500 UAH). Meanwhile, during last 2 years workers' incomes have dropped almost fourfold due to inflation and currency devaluation.

Working hours have also been increased from 8 to 12 per day. Also, drivers of heavy haulers (90-136 tons Belaz, Cat-



a mass meeting of the 300 striking workers

pillar and Komatsu mining trucks) are now being officially registered simply as 'drivers'.

In response to this intolerable situation the industrial action is continuing; judging from the results of the first week, management isn't eager to look for constructive solutions. With their every step, the factory management has sought to escalate the dispute.

After workers had announced the beginning of their action in the media, the Ferrexpo company press department has launched a disinformation campaign trying to refute and misrepresent the workers action. After video of interviews with workers of the mine had been shown, the press began to side with the workers. In response the company has adopted a new tactic of seeking to enter into negotiations, whilst launching a new press campaign in order to assure the Ukrainian and foreign media that there is no threat of a full stoppage of production at the mine, and that the action doesn't affect the enterprise's revenues.

Meanwhile, at a meeting with the region's deputy governor, workers were invited to stop the industrial action, and a new commission for evaluation would be instituted. Workers, fearing deception, continued their action, and the next day, 4th of August, the management issued order #1800 by which it has unilaterally scrapped a number of safety rules for drivers of heavy haulers. Specifically, they excluded the rule which forbade overtaking and included the rule which sets minimal speed limit. Overtaking and overruns are the two most frequent reasons of wrecks in the quarry.

The independent trade union 'People's Solidarity' has written collective letters to the public prosecutor's office and to the Ombudsman. The management also appealed to the local authorities, and activists received summons to the local public prosecutor's office. It seems like the authorities act as the employer's agents to intimidate workers. One of the workers' leaders was fired. Some workers were suspended from work. Repression against workers is growing.

Now the employer has hired 70 scab drivers from another city and put them up in a hotel in Komsomolsk under the guard of private detectives. Every day, armed with Kalashnikov machine-guns, private guards'convoy scabs to the quarry and back to the hotel giving no possibility even to speak to them. (It should be noted that machine-gun firearms are officially prohibited for private guards in Ukraine.) At the moment strikebreakers have not succeeded in increasing production because they do not find it so easy to drive the heavy mining trucks. It's clear that it would be impossible to increase output without grave danger for the life of workers. But it looks like the employer does not care about possible fatalities.

In spite of this the strikers are resolute; they are doing their utmost to maintain their action in the face of the intimidation and strike breaking by Ferrexpo Plc. The management, having no desire to agree to the workers demands, pays for publications in the international media on a daily basis, assuring readers of colossal revenue growth. Such boasting is particularly cynical, since everyone knows that this revenue is obtained by the super-exploiting of the workers at the enterprise.

The industrial action will last until full satisfaction of the workers' demands, which are as follows:

- ★ an increase of wages by at least 50%;
- ★ lowering daily and monthly output quotas to fit the safety requirements and actual human abilities;
- ★ restitution of the '1st hazard list' and relevant social and pension benefits to all workers of the mine.

This action is clearly provoked by the employer's impudent unwillingness to meaningfully negotiate with the workers. Ferrexpo Poltava Mining C.E.O. Viktor Lotous said to workers that they are "clowns" and advised one driver to "change his wife" if he can't provide for the family.

Nearly one thousand of workers are involved in the action and are losing now approximately 40% of salary due to the underfulfilment of output norms.

The Poltava miners need international solidarity to force Ferrexpo to stop repression, negotiate seriously and secure the workers' just demands.

Demonstrate outside Ferrexpo's office in London on Friday 3rd September from 4:30pm at 2-4 King Street, SW1.

Sponsors of the demonstration include: The Commune; John McDonnell MP; Labour Representation Committee; Joe Marino, General Secretary of Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union; Indian Workers Association (GB), Globalise Resistance; Steve Hedley, Organiser and Vaughan Thomas, President, London Region RMT; Glenroy Watson, RMT Finsbury Park branch chairperson; Permanent Revolution, Republican Communist Network; Indian Welfare Association (GB); Latin American Workers Association.

demo to support berns salonger cleaners

An IWW member reports on a recent demo in London in solidarity with migrant cleaners at Berns Salonger, a Swedish night club which has seen a long-running dispute over victimisations, low wages and 22-hour shifts.

On 13th August 2010 the Cleaners Defence Committee, London IWW Branch, and other supporters demonstrated outside the offices of London Regional [the club's owner] in solidarity with the SAC [the workers' union] for two hours, handing out information to the staff and passers-by.

The turnout was good and was supported by other groups including branches of The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMT) Solidarity Federation, Feminist Fightback, Latin American Workers Association, London Coalition Against Poverty amongst others.

Letters of support were read out from comrades in Germany, in the FAU and German IWW, who were engaging in similar solidarity action.

London Regional has so far denied all responsibility and association with Berns, a Swedish Nightclub/company responsible for severe mistreatment of its cleaning staff, hav-



the cleaners' defence committee brings together a wide range of left forces in london

ing made some cleaners work up to 22 hour shifts six or so days a week. The dispute between Berns and the SAC continues, though London Regional will not engage in dialogue with the IWW, CDC, or any of the individuals and groups who have phoned up with their complaints.

But the message to London Regional / Berns is loud and clear, we will never ignore the mistreatment of workers anywhere, and will stand with our brothers and sisters when they need our help. The battle is not over, and we will be back as often as need be to win this dispute. These demonstrations will grow unless the stubborn managers of Berns and London Regional agree to negotiate.

We once again thank everybody who has been supporting this campaign so far and who turned up to make the demonstration on the 13th the success that it was. We once again send our message of solidarity to the SAC, who we stand with, and wish all the best in the struggle ahead.

★ This demo was called by the Cleaners Defence Committee, a network established early in 2010 to organise solidarity with migrant cleaners at Swiss bank UBS in the City of London. If you would like to know more about its activities, email cleanersdefencecommittee@gmail.com

is unison ready to resist the cuts?

A UNISON branch official looks at the attacks on the left within the union at a time when public sector workers face major cuts

This summer Dave Prentis won his bid to become General Secretary of UNISON for the third time with 67.2% of the vote (based on a very poor 14% turn out). As a speaker at conference Dave Prentis often talks left.

However, despite his fine words, he has been at the helm during a period when the left have suffered serious attacks from the leadership. Several very well known and respected left wingers in UNISON have faced harassment and even expulsion on trumped up and unfounded charges. Some of these instances are well known amongst the wider labour movement.

One of the most infamous of these attacks was the disciplining of four branch officers and Socialist Party members over a leaflet featuring the three wise monkeys "hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil". This was intended as a criticism of the Conference's standing orders committee who had ruled a large proportion of contentious motions out of order. The leadership accused them of racism as the chair of the standing orders committee was black. This dreadful decision was made despite the knowledge that the individuals were active Socialists and hardly likely to be racist. Even amongst many union moderates this was regarded as a politically motivated attack.

This year, a delegate was ordered to leave the conference floor for wearing a T-shirt saying "Yunus Bakhsh, working class hero" on it. Yunus has been one of the most well known figures to be subject to this witch hunt. The UNISON leadership had sided with his employer when he was sacked for alleged misconduct and dealt him a double blow by expelling him from the union. An employment tribunal has since declared Yunus' dismissal from employment as unfair and due to his activities as a trade unionist. It is a pretty sorry state of affairs when an employment tribunal supports a victimised trade unionist whilst his union will not.

What is most sad is the devastating effect this has had on those activists that have been subject to the witch hunt. Without exception they are people who have devoted their lives to UNISON and the unions that came together to form UNISON in the early 90's. They have been leading figures in some of the most energetic and inspirational branches. What the leadership fail to understand (or maybe understand only too well) is that by removing these individuals they are removing a good deal of the heart of our union and weakening us in our fight against the bosses attacks.

The attacks began it appears with the raiding of the Plymouth city branch in 2006. This raid led to the suspension and eventual expulsion of Tony Staunton, a respected trade



a national demo over the NHS cuts was only called after massive pressure from lay activists

unionist and leading figure of the United Left in the South West. He was basically accused of downloading leftwing materials on to a computer he used for union work but this very neatly coincided with his bid to run against a right winger in the National executive elections. The witch hunt has since engulfed some of the best known figures on the UNISON left.

The reason for these attacks can be discovered in the leadership's relationship with New Labour. In their last term in office, opposition to privatisation and cuts from public sector workers increased. Attacks were occurring on Local Government pensions, outsourcing and PFI builds were happening across the whole public sector and the marketisation of the NHS had led to a crisis and major cuts in many NHS trusts.

Some branches of UNISON began to fight back. It was very obvious that the leadership of UNISON didn't want to rock the boat for the Labour Government and actively tried to keep their membership quiet.

A national demonstration over the NHS cuts was only called after massive pressure from lay activists and then held once the initial anger had turned to demoralisation. Branches were left to fight alone as no nationally co-ordinated action was organised. Members were encouraged to accept below inflation pay rises.

However certain figures on the left were winning over the membership to a position of fighting back. At the 2006 Health sector conference Yunus Bakhsh had received a standing ovation from the floor after encouraging conference to resist New Labour's cuts and the privatisation

agenda in the NHS. The witch hunt has attempted to silence these individuals and has left others worried about standing up against the leadership's approach for fear of a similar fate.

Things don't appear to have changed since the election of the ConDem Government either. The ConDems are imposing a pay freeze on all grades in the NHS at staff nurse level and above and a below inflation offer for those below a staff nurses grade. UNISON have already produced a circular pouring cold water upon any prospect of an Industrial Action ballot despite conference agreeing on this in the event of a pay freeze. I can only imagine that they believe large scale industrial action would be damaging to New Labour's chances of getting back in to power. Maybe they think it could lose public sector workers sympathy from the general public: as if we aren't part of the general public!

The only way to change this abysmal situation is for UNISON members and public sector workers in general to begin to fight back against the ConDems plan to devastate public services and our pay and conditions. This fight back will need to be organised by the public sector workers themselves regardless of what their union leadership thinks. It is only in doing this that they will grow in confidence and class consciousness and begin to challenge the politics of the leadership.

Whilst I think it remains important for socialists to stand for elections in the union it has to be remembered that real change comes from below and election results are just a reflection of the level of class consciousness amongst the rank and file.

strike wave in china

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From our perspective, this is all very encouraging, but what does it say about the possibilities of reinvigorated rank-and-file struggle closer to home? Of course, there are obvious differences to the class struggle in the West, but there are also important similarities. Perhaps the most interesting comparison to be made is in the respective compositions of the official trade unions.

The relationship between the Chinese "yellow unions" and the company bosses could hardly be more blatant. For example, the Foxconn ACFTU president, Chen Peng, is also a senior manager of the company! But when Western union leaders actively seek to disorientate workers and strangle their struggles in the name of 'social partnership', their class position is almost the same relative to the workforce.

To give a Western comparison, Obama has given the United Auto Workers union a stake in General Motors and Chrysler, the leadership literally does have a seat at corporate board meetings, and directly profits from increased exploitation. As an illustration of this, the UAW bureaucrats are currently trying to force through wage cuts of almost 50% at an Indianapolis stamping plant.

The nascent Chinese uprising illustrates the truth in Sheila Cohen's March article in *The Commune*. In 'Workers' Coun-

cils: the Red Mole of Revolution', she asked why workers' councils spring up 'spontaneously' in very different geographic and historic cases. "The answer is simple", she remarked, "because the form is simple; the form is constructed from the requirements of the situation, not plucked from thin air."

Workers in Chinese sweatshops have now formed workers' councils, just as countless workers have over the last 150 years. When the avenues for advancement through top-down representation have been exhausted, bottom-up, collective decision-making and delegation is the only alternative that fits.

The Chinese economy is under increasing strain. In the wake of the global crash two years ago, the Communist Party government flooded the market with a more than a trillion dollars of loans. But that money has now run out, and with less demand coming from the recession and cutbacks hit West, Chinese manufacture for export is about to crash.

It seems likely that a tidal wave of resistance will result, making this summer's revolts look like a trickle. The repercussions for the global economy would be unprecedented, and the idea of workers' councils could well spread beyond China. To paraphrase the old Chinese proverb, we may live in interesting times.

how to fight cuts

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Leaflets need to be prepared outlining the attacks and how we fight back. This will need patience and hard work as bit by bit the class gets what is happening.

It means stunts and actions to highlight the effect of the cuts, who is responsible and why the rich should pay not the working class. Take this fight to constituency offices, Conservative clubs, banks, and, yes, support the demos outside the LibDem and Tory conferences.

It also means the slow but important task of building strong rank and files in the unions, linked with local communities, anti-cuts groups etc. If union leaders will not act we must. Workplace bulletins are imperative in this work.

As the struggle develops this autumn opportunities and initiatives will arise. As they do communists should be developing the argument for a permanent change to a society based on workers' self management and communism from below. they should also be operating these principles in practice wherever they are engaged whether in the unions, anti-cuts groups etc demonstrating the practice as well as the theory.

This is a hugely important time, and reinvigorated libertarian left has a key opportunity to help a successful and mass fight back. Equally, if it is mishandled the movement is facing a massive defeat which may discredit it for decades.

a zero-hours contract... for thousands of hours

Jack Staunton writes on his work in a call centre compiling government market research surveys

When drunk we feel a strange kind of tiredness. Not the exhaustion of physical exertion nor the sleepiness which dusks in the late evening, but rather a cloying, dulling hibernation of the mind. This same sensation is brought about by endless hours of repetitive workplace routine.

I have worked well over a thousand days at the call centre. I have read through still more thousands of surveys. The call centre does not test us physically or mentally yet it is a massive drain of human energy and vitality.

The idea is to collate telephone surveys for various government departments. We ask businesses how much training they do, if they need more government support, what they think the answer to the recession is. Every survey is unique yet they are all the same: half-arsed and self-contradictory fragments of ideas, answering what they think they are meant to say to a bunch of questions which tell them what they are meant to say.

No-one employed here is interested in the work: our skills are not utilised, we have no initiative and we have no sense of power.

Wasting time with people who waste time doing surveys

The important thing is to get the person to do the survey. If they know nothing about the subject, that's fine, as long as they sit through it to the end. Most people we speak to are "Human Resources" managers, they have all the time in the world for surveys since their only other responsibility is hiring 'n firing.

Mostly the intention of the surveys is to big up various quangos and government departments who want to demonstrate how much business people need them. Market research is a massive, self-perpetuating bubble of activity. It is unverifiable, unfalsifiable, it just exists because that's the kind of thing any self-respecting quango would want to do. What the people tell you is zzzzzz boring.

Last week the woman from the Department came into see us. Big smiles all round, she said how much the government valued our work and the feedback from the industry. I bet she doesn't have to compete with her workmates to get her shifts. Some of the call centre directors grouped round a

plasma TV with the company logo: big smiles too, for an hour, although they said nothing at all. She thanked us for all our help a second time. The mumbled, fake grin of sixty telephone interviewers was almost deafening.

The meaningless buzzwords we spout could almost be classed as nostalgia for New Labour Britain. Who in your social enterprise needs upskilling? Are you backing young Britain? Do you tend to agree or strongly agree that the recession is over? OK, I can't write that answer into the computer system, just give me a rating on a scale of 1 to 10.

Sometimes we amuse ourselves making silly jokes over the phone. They ask you to spell something for them? Yes sir, sorry, that's L for leather, A for aubergine, C for czar, K for know. Try and say hello before the person who answers the phone does. Put on a funny accent then cough madly and go back to normal. A fine distraction from the mind-numbing work.

That's part of the problem though. Management don't need to pretend it's interesting. At Somerfield they tell you you're part of a team working to improve customer service, at the charity call centre they tell you you're helping raise money to beat cancer, at any other job there is some notion of collective effort or customer service. In the briefing here they tell it to you straight: this is dull, you don't need to understand it because that's not your problem, but work hard and it will be over sooner.

Who are we, how are we run

Thursday afternoon and time to book your shifts for next week. There is no guarantee of work, you could get told your shift for tomorrow has been cancelled. "Sorry, we had enough work for two hundred people today but there's no shifts available on Monday".

Fred the anarchist manager will tell you the call centre is not a full time job. You might have been here four years, yes, and Johnny's forty-six and has been here since 1995, but you shouldn't expect us to give you any shifts next week. Why don't you sort some other work out? There's ten call centres within a mile of here.

Often there are less than ten desks occupied by workers, the buzz dies down for a few weeks. The recession hasn't meant less work, but they weren't allowed to do any government research in a month and a half before the election. Lucky our Coalition rulers didn't need another poll this autumn.

Most of the colleagues are stoic. For they are not call centre workers, but aspiring actors, artists, law students. Part-

timers for years, but one day they'll return to their true calling. The actors are like Schwarzenegger or Stallone, worried about getting typecast... but in this case, in their role as long-term call centre employees. Apparently Jude Law used to work here: it must be true, all these actors with perfect Received Pronunciation English, at least one of them must have made it big.

Anyway, this year the call centre doesn't advertise for extras in *The Stage* anymore, the new people are young folk from JobCentre Plus. Maybe two dozen people have been at the call centre two years or more, a couple of hundred others just a few weeks. The interviewer has no right to continuous work, nor are we even afforded the most basic equal treatment. How dare you use the management toilets? Why are you making a coffee during working time (says the man standing between you and the jar of instant)? This will definitely be marked down on your stats: with more than four times more employees than booths in the call centre, you are competing to be selected to come back next week. Hence the massive turnover.

But play your cards right and you can be a supervisor. £8 an hour rather than £7.50, but you get to enforce the rules: no mobiles, no reading, no eating. Their inkling of authority drives them mad, a sort of Napoleon complex in the most pathetic setting imaginable. They too are low paid and casual, they too are bossed around. But they have zero empathy with the callers, even though sometimes they are on the phones themselves: just as many of the callers have disdain for the folks on JSA we interview on the phone, in spite of our own periods without work.

After one such dry spell, we'd been away for six weeks for the election. The training morning when we got back Leroy (£7/hour, 2 years' service) said "God, look at all the losers crawling back here!". Hypocritical but accurate. We really need it: the wages have been the same for years, but people are queuing up to work here.

No-one identifies as a call centre worker: it's an (endless) stop-gap for them, or else they'll tell you everyone else who works here is in a dead end but I'm going to make something of myself. You bump into some of them at demos for Gaza. They think capitalism's shit. They wouldn't dream of joining the union. We are atomised, powerless, unconfident and desperate for work we know to be beneath us.

Did you ever read the story about the guy who won the Lottery but loved his job so much that he didn't give up working? He didn't work here, I don't think. I don't think Jude Law did either.

the wire faces inwards: 'the security is to keep us in!'

Sharon Borthwick reviews *Rivethead*, a 'book of tales from the assembly line'

Revealing a talent for writing poetry at school does not relieve Ben Hamper of his birthright. Duplicating his father and his father's father he awaits, 'to be pronounced fit for active drudgery' by the medics. It wasn't the plan.

As a child at factory open days, he bore witness to his father's crappy lot at the General Motors plant in his hometown of Flint, Michigan. But failed stints at other ventures led him through GM's grounds, past the barbed wire. Later a fellow "prisoner" becomes absorbed by the fact that the wire faces inwards, 'the security is to keep us in!'

Other means to incarceration are the good wages, 'that pay stub was like a pair of concrete loafers.' Not that the security lasts, the men are regularly laid off due to economic downturns, though Jimmy Carter tops up their dole packets to the extent they can make light and even party right in the face of unemployment. Not so in the Reagan years, of course.

Back at the plant amidst the noise, 'very close to intolerable' and the heat, 'one complete bastard', the men are ground down by still more humiliations. 'Quality' becomes the company's new byword and a man donning a cat costume becomes quality's personification.

But lo, the workers are to be party in their own infantilisation. A competition to name the stupid cat is held; hence he shall be called, Howie Makem. And the men generously whoop and applaud when Howie makes an appearance on the factory floor. Not so the giant message board that eternally flashes up inane taunts at the 'shoprats' - 'squeezing rivets is fun' one of the more notably contemptible - and no

amount of chucking spanners and like projectiles will stop the green neon's idiot jibes.

So how do they survive, 'the repetition as strangulation' load they bare? For one they drink. They drink after work at the requisite bar opposite the plant, but that's just to carry on the bender they've been on since clocking on. They fill all their quotas but they drink. They drink and arse about and do anything that may beat the ever-watched, tyrant clock. 'Rivet hockey' is introduced - the object with steady aim kick that deadly hard missile at your buddy's shinbone, the resulting laughter may offer some minutes' release.

If you really get lucky and find an efficient worker who can take on your job as well as his own, and you are able to do the same for him, you can each bugger off for half the day, your quotas still in tact. Ben Hamper made this deal with a couple of work-mates, his luck further enhanced in having a supervisor who would turn a blind-eye as long as the work was completed. Yes, well that couldn't last, the work being done and some happy crew aren't enough for GM company policy, naturally, and they move this supervisor away from his men for being 'too close to his work-force'.

With a succession of arse-licking bosses, Hamper's days are numbered. He starts to have terrifying panic attacks on the factory floor so needs to take sick leave and various medication as intense agoraphobia sets in. He's among many driven insane by this bare existence. One of his colleagues befriends a mouse, building a little cardboard house for his pet and cooing at it through the windows. But the coos become taunts and then with ever escalating violence he shakes his captive rodent till his rage explodes and he ends in incinerating the poor beast with a blow torch. Another worker at the plant is headline news as he made a knife attack on the two waitresses who nightly served the men; they find him dead from an overdose.

Hamper's interest in writing eventually resurfaces. Whilst still at GM he starts to send articles to Michael Moore, the then editor of *The Michigan Voice*. He introduced himself by writing about music until Moore persuades him to expound about life on the assembly line. For his column he goes by the title *Rivethead*. His articles prove popular and he is courted by the big American talk shows. The book leaves open what happened next as we leave him still recovering from mental illness. Hamper and other victims of drudgery have given rise to the genre, 'The blue-collar writer'.

On the strength of this I may try out some more. *Rivethead* put me in mind of Herman Melville's *Bartleby, The scrivener* (1853). The narrator of this story is Bartleby's employer. Other copyists in his employ cannot endure the whole long office day without acts of frustrated rebellion. One has morning bouts of ill humour, shifting his desk here and there, sighing as he tries this and that position over his papers while his colleague scrivener works efficiently but cannot hold out like this the whole day and makes blotchy copies by afternoon.

Bartleby is employed on sight for his quite demeanor, "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!". He is set in his master's office by a window with "no view at all" behind a high screen so to completely isolate him from sight. Here he writes on, "silently, palely, mechanically" but when asked to do anything at all on top like proof the copies with his workmates, calmly replies, "I would prefer not to". He offers up this passive resistance unto death ultimately preferring not to sustain life further by food.

Like Ben Hamper and his colleagues he has lost his own mind by the repetitive actions demanded of him by his wage slavery.

the strategies we need, the strategies we don't

Tom Denning writes on the organisational objectives and methods needed to fight the new government's cuts

Around the country, anti-cuts committees have been set up, often on the auspices of the local trades Council or a Unison branch. These committees are just beginning to find their feet, to produce bulletins, to plan demos, street stalls and public meetings. At their best, they will be alliances of local worker and community activists, determined to work together to take effective action to force back cuts.

As is so often the case, the activity of the real movement has run ahead of its theorists. But what does that movement consist of so far? In what ways does the changing structure of the public-sector workforce determine the needs of that movement? What does it need to grow, and win?

The reorganisation of the class

In the last three decades, just as capital sought new avenues for profit through financialisation, and increasingly came to rely on mass debt—private, corporate, state – and inflated asset prices, it also sought, urgently, to extract more labour from the working class, for less. The changes that Thatcher – and her successors – wrought in the pursuit of this agenda “fundamentally changed the character of British society”. If we examine just four areas in which such changes have taken place, it is possible to see how the tax on the working class of the past three decades define the present needs of our movement.

Public sector work overwhelmingly and increasingly performed by women. The declining viability of the single pay-cheque family is a significant factor in pulling increasing numbers of women into work. 65.2% of public-sector workers are women (compared to 41.2% of private-sector workers). This probably understates the real picture, since higher grades and management are still overwhelmingly male. Women typically perform low status, part time jobs, and for these reasons, will be hit especially hard by the proposed cuts. Meanwhile, the left and the official leadership in unions are overwhelmingly male. Why does this matter? Because, to be effective, a movement must be organised by those whose interests it seeks to defend, and in a way that empowers that constituency. The socialist wing of the women's liberation movement produced a wealth of ideas on how activists should organise differently, relying less on “heroic” leaders and more on cooperative organisation—we need to reinvestigate, and consider applying those ideas. One simple proposal as an example: because women still bear the greater burden of childcare, anti-cuts meetings ought to provide creches.

Outsourcing, casualisation, agency work, and “illegal” workers. In order to keep the costs of labour low and shore up profitability, capitalists have deployed a battery of techniques to divide workers, making them more vulnerable, dispensable, low skilled, and less likely to share common conditions – in the form of nationally negotiated agreements, for example. In many areas of work, recent years have seen the accelerated introduction of lower paid auxiliary staff, as an alternative to increasing the number of those on existing grades: think of teaching assistants, or community support officers. These low paid agency workers often do the same job as those who are directly employed. There is a rapid acceleration in the number of part-time workers, as well as “zero hours” contracts and “sessional” work.

Many of the current government's plans for public sector, as well as those implemented by New Labour since 1997, have been at root about undermining national bargaining, whilst intensifying outsourcing and casualisation. Academy schools and recent proposals to turn the NHS into a network of private contractors are two examples. Why is all this important? Because we need to develop a movement which can do what we failed to do in the past decades: effectively resist new casualisation, and roll back what there is already.

The new unemployment, and the abolition of welfare. Unemployment now stands at 2.5 million, and will almost certainly pass 3 million given government projections; whilst the proportion of unemployed people claiming benefits is lower than ever. Meanwhile, the Welfare Reform (Abolition) Act 2009, dreamt up before unemployment began to rise sharply, will make life poorer and harder for the jobless. Cuts of at least 5% to welfare spending are planned by 2015. 41,000 UK families relied on food banks to eat at some point in 2009-10. Yet the web of unemployed workers groups and claimants unions, many founded in the 70s and 80s, has all but evaporated. There are a few excep-



the casualisation of work and mass unemployment will shape resistance to the cuts

tions, and a few new initiatives, for example in Hackney, Newham, Kilburn, Ipswich, and Edinburgh. There is an initiative to build a national movement of such self organised groups, founded on the basis of practical, day-to-day solidarity. An unemployed workers' movement is vital, not only because of the huge numbers of people who will be in the grip of a viciously inadequate social security system, but because we need to ensure that mass unemployment is as expensive and hence is as undesirable for the state as possible.

The bureaucracy and disorganisation of key unions. Trade unions are contradictory phenomenon: on the one hand, expressions of workers' self organisation and activity; on the other, institutions which also tend to restrict that same self activity. With the quiescence of the workers' movement in recent years, the latter tendency has become particularly strong. Let's look at some of the problems. Teachers are divided into three unions, with little culture of supporting each other's industrial action, and support staff are in two more. PCS, the civil servants' union, has a relatively leftward leadership, willing to take industrial action, but in recent years it seems as though either the organisation or will have been lacking for serious fights.

UNISON, the most important public sector union by some way, is in a dire state. Outside local government, many branches are effectively organised through patronage from the centre, whilst density and organisation are very low. The union has a record of colluding with employers to victimise key militants and to suppress left branches. The relationship between the union and the state, through the Labour Party, is incestuous. For example, the Newham local government branch is run by an appointee, one Steve Terry, a Labour councillor in neighbouring Waltham Forest. Manifestly it is directly against his interests to permit militancy amongst local government workers. There are a plethora of less obvious connections. We need a culture of independent rank and file organisation, willing to defy union leaders and the law, and breaking the boundaries between unions, when necessary – which will be often. (This isn't an abstract fantasy: in the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps 95% of strikes were unofficial; as late as 2003 26% of strike days were lost to unofficial action.) It is the paradox of the unions that, nonetheless, activists will also find it necessary, in many areas, to build and strengthen Unison. Ritual denunciations of union leaders are indeed useless, but rank-and-file organisers need to have a keen awareness of their position.

All these things considered, there's a frightening distance between the movement we have and the movement we need; between our conventional tactical and organisational repertoire, and the demands of the coming years.

The movement we have, the movement we need

The standard repertoire of the left is more or less as follows. There will be demonstration after demonstration, speech after speech, leaflet after leaflet. There will be numerous “broad” campaigns, which will hold conference after conference. The left will organise within official union structures for official strikes and for somewhat more leftward leaders to replace the current ones.

But to think that any number of marches, no matter how many millions strong, any way of framing or presenting the issue, no matter how clever, any number of one or two or

three day strikes, no matter how many people visit the picket lines, is a recipe for rolling back the cuts is deluded. If we look to our history for the last time that an assault of this seriousness was challenged effectively, we must look to the movement against the poll tax: mass organisation, town by town, borough by borough, ward by ward, street by street. Mass direct action: refusal to pay, refusal to allow bailiffs to raid the homes of nonpayers. Of course, the poll tax movement benefited from the relative simplicity of non-payment; which is not necessarily replicated by the industrial, and other direct, action we need. But it illustrates the scale of the challenge, and reminds us of our own potential: like the anti-poll tax movement, we must build from below, and make our agenda disruption, not just demands.

Alliances we need, alliances we don't

The Socialist Workers' Party's Richard Seymour argues for “a multi-party, multi-organisation, trade union-based united front, the sole criterion for unity within it being agreement on the objective of preventing the cuts and advancing alternatives”. In particular, he emphasises the importance of the Labour Party, which “remains rooted in the organised working class”.

Richard doesn't say what sort of alliance with what sort of Labour Party figures he's thinking of, or what such an alliance should do. To give this some concrete form: should we invite Labour councillors or MPs to speak at anti-cuts meetings? In general, with a very few honourable exceptions, I would argue against this. Why? Firstly, these figures are not only unwilling but, more importantly, unable to mobilise the sort of action that we need. Think about the Labour MP near you. Is it conceivable that they would back a call for unofficial strikes, and more importantly, even if they did, would anyone you know listen to them? The Labour Party has changed a lot—though even 20 years ago, it opposed the non-payment campaign which beat the poll tax, and were not necessary to its success.

We do need to work with those grassroots Labour Party members who are serious about resisting cuts. But rather than providing credibility to Labour MPs who want to posture against the cuts, we ought to relentlessly focus on building our own, organic leadership from below. In the time it takes any Labour MP to speechify, five public sector workers could have stood up and shared their experiences of work, and their hopes and fears of the future. And it is this direct contact between workers and community members that a movement can be built upon. This said, if any Labour MP is willing and able to start seriously building for industrial action locally, we should work with them to do that: but what we shouldn't do is give them a platform which they can use for their own ends, while ignoring ours.

It makes no sense to decide the boundaries of your alliances, without first specifying what you want them to do. Form ought to follow function. In order to organise action, it is most important to agree upon methods: and the more specific, particular and definite those methods the better. This movement will be built from below: the new anti-cuts committees are the embryonic form of the alliances we must construct; bringing together community and workplace activists and organisations.

Conclusions

The old ways were not enough when capital was feeling politically amiable: they will certainly not be enough now. I've claimed that a positive vision for public services, and public jobs, needs to be developed; we need to evaluate seriously what a movement mostly composed of working-class women needs; and that the basis for our alliances ought not to be abstract agreement on opposition to cuts, but calls for definite, specific, and militant action. We need to revitalise the unemployed workers movement. To prepare for this, we need to develop forms of class communication, propaganda and education which constantly expose the real meaning of “cuts” (the latest form of assault on the employment relationship and welfare state established during the post-war boom), and argue that we must not, do not have to, accept them.

If your town or area doesn't already have an anti-cuts committee, consider setting one up, perhaps through a local trades council; if there is one, join, and try to make it open, practical, and militant. Whether you choose to organise directly through the union, or with the assistance of a rank-and-file group of some kind, start to organise and agitate—now. Perhaps these things seem hopeless now, but at times like this they often do and yet often before militants and movements have made the unexpected real.

★ Originally commissioned for a newleftproject.org debate.

the social wage and the hackney

Camille Barbagallo and Nic Beuret look at the role of public services and how the cuts axe is falling

Childcare services in the UK are under attack. Childcare services across the country are being defunded, abolished and downgraded. In this article we start with the specific cuts in Hackney to nursery places and analyse these cuts in the context of the gendered nature of the ConDem's austerity budget. We explore both what enables these cuts to happen now and what their effects will be and conclude with some reflections on possible paths of resistance within the current crisis of care.

Let's be honest - the public services that are being cut include things that we need, but we hate how they are given to us: like unemployment benefits. They also involve jobs that we rely on but resent having to do. But what is also true is that they are part of a 'social wage' fought for and won by previous generations. By 'social wage' we mean the services and direct payments provided by the state that enable our subsistence. The health services, childcare, unemployment benefits, social housing – they are our social wage. The social wage has a dual effect. It operates as a method of discipline and control and also as a means of reducing the direct cost (to us) of our own material reproduction. Instead of paying the 'full' cost for childcare out of our wages, we get subsidised or 'free' childcare. Instead of paying directly for health services, such services are funded by taxation and provided by the NHS. Instead of having to put aside money in case we are sacked, we get the dole.

The social wage is also a way of 'paying the unpaid'. The primary focus of the social wage is social reproduction and involves labour that would otherwise be unwaged. This has historically been known as 'women's work' such as caring for children, the elderly, the sick and disabled, the health of the body and emotional and psychological services such as counselling, etc. The social wage is a way of redistributing income so as to benefit those people whose (unwaged) labour is fundamental and vital for the reproduction of workers and capitalism in general.

None of this is to say that the social wage is unproblematic. Obviously it is – under capitalism wage relations are based on exploitation and alienation, and the various elements of the social wage are no exception. We need the services because we have no other choice. This relates to the double freedom that Marx talks about as the precondition of wage labour. Like other wage struggles, the ultimate aim must be to go beyond the immediate relation and create a new social relationship. But we can't do this by opting out. Not only because dropping out and making our own little utopias does not get us any closer to the necessary transformation of the world in which we live, but because the social wage represents real struggles and gains. We need to be in, against and beyond the social wage.

The Hackney situation

Hackney's nurseries are under attack ironically not because of the ConDem's budget, but because the Learning Trust, a private company that controls the funding for children's services in Hackney, arbitrarily cut nursery funding in April 2010. Friends of Hackney Nurseries (FHN), a coalition of nursery workers, parents and community activists that we are members of, has been fighting to stop these cuts with some success.

The Hackney Learning Trust - the UK's first private not-for-profit company to take over the responsibility of running all education services for an entire borough - imposed cuts of up to £50,000 to nurseries receiving commissioning grants. Commissioning grants subsidise childcare places for parents on low incomes. Commissioning grants have, until recently, only been paid to the 13 remaining community nurseries in Hackney, out of 68 childcare 'settings' in Hackney. These 68 include Council-run children's centres, community nurseries (not-for-profit parent and staff managed nurseries) and private nurseries (private nurseries make up half of the total childcare places). As a result of the massive cuts to commissioning grant funding and cuts to other funding streams, many community nurseries are reducing both staff numbers and childcare places. Some are even facing closure because of it.

Both the Council and the Learning Trust have, after much public pressure, claimed that the overall pot of money for low-income families in Hackney has not been cut – it has just been redistributed. They have resisted providing evi-



when nurseries were first told of the cuts (one month before they were to be implemented), friends of hackney nurseries quickly reformed after 10 years of inactivity

dence of this, and the timeline of action then reaction tells another story – one of incompetence and a slow but steady strategy of privatisation.

When nurseries were first told of the cuts (one month before they were to be implemented), FHN quickly reformed after 10 years of inactivity and immediately set about working with parents and nurseries to put pressure on the Council and Learning Trust to reverse the cuts. This all happened just prior to the general elections this year, making public shaming particularly effective as a tactic. In short order the Mayor of Hackney, Jules Pipe, condemned the Learning Trust's behaviour and the Learning Trust scrambled to meet with the handful of nurseries that had started to publicly voice their opposition.

Despite saying publicly that the money had not been cut but redistributed, in the end the Learning Trust reversed half of the cuts largely through something they called a 'cushioning fund' – a one off grant to help the affected nurseries through the hardship of the cuts. They didn't say where this extra money had been found.

After this shambles, things got even more interesting. Meetings between nurseries and the Learning Trust were set up then cancelled without explanation. Different letters were sent, seemingly at random, to different nurseries all saying slightly different things. The Learning Trust started contacting community nurseries to offer them help in winding down their operations. During the weeks of confusion and misinformation the Learning Trust announced that commissioning grants would now be available to all nurseries in Hackney, further reducing the amount available to community nurseries (due to increased competition with the private nurseries).

What does all this mean? It would seem that the redistribution of funding from community nurseries to private nurseries is part of the last stages of the privatisation of childcare services.

Over the last 20 years the total amount of money given to community nurseries has steadily reduced. At the same time there has been an explosion of private nurseries in Hackney. Ten years ago there were no private nursery spaces in Hackney. Now, around half of all childcare places are privately provided.

Why does privatisation of childcare matter?

It could be argued, as it has been by many Hackney Councillors, that it doesn't matter if childcare is provided by the

Council, by community-run centres, or by private businesses. So as long as the total number of childcare places in Hackney hasn't been reduced, does it really matter on what basis they are provided?

The short answer is yes. The case against privatisation can be summed up as follows. A service run according to the logic of the market tends to drive down costs (and therefore quality), reduce staff and employment conditions to the absolute minimum (reducing wages and reducing the quality of the childcare again), increase the costs to the service user (through fee increases) and reduce provision to those areas where it's profitable (creating a system where having a service and the quality of that service directly relate to how much you earn). There is also the issue of directing public funds (via grants) to private-for-profit businesses. Any one of these outcomes are reason enough to reject the privatisation of community or public services.

But the flip side is that state-run services are also deeply problematic. They provide us with services we need but in relationships of subservience or dependence. It is no wonder that state-run services are so unpopular, with most of the population of the UK preferring service cuts to tax increases. While the services we have are a direct result of the pressure we have been able to exert as antagonistic social movements, this pressure has been channelled into the creation of services that follow the logic of the state and serve the needs of capitalism. Our confrontation with capital is over the imposition of waged labour and the form this labour takes. But our struggle with the state is over the overall management of our lives; in particular, the management of our own material reproduction.

Cuts to services are not a removal of the state's management of our lives, just a reconfiguration. With the move from community-run childcare to either Council or private childcare we lose something essential – control. The only childcare services parents have any control over in a meaningful way are community nurseries. Committees of parents and staff manage them, and parents are encouraged to be involved at a decision-making and organisation level. In contrast Council appointed staff manage Council nurseries and private nurseries may 'involve' parents but they usually do so in order to reduce their costs. Privatisation undermines one of our most important gains from the struggles of the 60s and 70s – community services that we manage for our own material reproduction but that have financial resources provided by the state. This is why the slow decline of funding and the latest attack on community nurseries is so important. They are the last of the childcare services we have any control over in Hackney.

y nurseries campaign

Outside the laboratory

Hackney has always been something of a laboratory for New Labour, and the Learning Trust is a perfect case in point. However it is not just in Hackney these cuts are taking place. Across the UK, at a borough level and at a University level, childcare services are facing declining funding and further cuts. At least 20 universities are cutting childcare services, many other Councils are cutting provision, rents are being increased and central Government is looking to cut funding streams.

As other observers have pointed out, the difference between New Labour and the ConDems is a difference of degree. It is clear that had New Labour won the election they too would be embarking on cuts to the social wage. In fact the cuts in Hackney were announced prior to any central Government cuts, and are taking place as part of a broader historical tendency – neo-liberalism.

Clearly these cuts need to be stopped, and sufficient funding restored in the short term. In the longer term there needs to be a conversation at both a community level and a national level about how we want our children to be cared for, outside of the logic of the market and beyond just making it possible for women to re-enter the workforce in greater numbers. Before we can begin this conversation, we need to understand why these cuts are happening now, and what they mean.

Cuts to public services are not just about reducing state expenditure on the social wage but also about regulating the labour market and producing a specific kind of subjectivity. The current economic crisis is being used to continue the social project of neo-liberalism, even as the engine of capitalist growth, the financial sector falters. The neo-liberal project has developed along two axes – winding back the social wage and introducing the market as the basis for all social relations.

However the difference between the current cuts in the UK and the earlier phases of neo-liberalism both here and elsewhere around the globe is twofold. Firstly, capitalism has no need to increase the labour force in the UK – if anything, the total numbers available for paid work needs to be reduced to make sure that the numbers of unemployed do not grow excessively and that an entire generation of workers are not lost. Secondly, there is a need to ensure that there is not a reproductive crisis in the working class (this is expressed by Cameron as the desire to ‘fix Broken Britain’). The government needs to find a way to reduce state expenditure on the social wage without significantly undermining the continuity of care and continued reproduction of the working class.

The post-feminist discourse of ‘free-market’ feminists, ‘liberal’ feminists and the all of the major political parties enters into this crisis as an organising ideological force. It is through the discourse of ‘choice’ that women are being encouraged to either move away from waged labour and back to the home or resume the gendered ‘second shift’ of unpaid work in the home as well as working outside the home for wages. The return to the home is not only being proposed to women – men too, but only as long as their partners earn more than they do. The idea that life decisions are rationale choices made on a cost-benefit analysis pervades current responses to both the paucity of care, the disparity between men and women’s wages and an ever-present desire to escape waged labour.

It’s through the discourse of choice that the state can withdraw funding from services without endangering social reproduction or provoking confrontation. The choice of love, family and community over money and careers is at the heart of post-feminist discourse. It is also at the heart of Cameron’s Big Society. This ‘choice’ takes place within the context of a massive economic and political assault on women. According to the Fawcett Society, 72% of cuts from income due to tax and social security changes will fall upon women. They make up the overwhelming majority of part time workers in the public service and are the first to face redundancy. They are also far more likely to be the beneficiaries of social services. The reality is that the latest cuts are overwhelming directed at women. So the ‘rational choice’ ends up being not a choice at all but instead a necessity to return to the home to perform unpaid reproductive labour.

The aim of the Big Society is to reduce the social wage, and to return social reproduction to the realm of the unpaid. It is also an attempt to change historical expectations – not a return to the fifties, but the creation of a voluntaristic morality

that serves the same function of relocating people (women for the most part) back into the home to perform unpaid labour. The rational choice of generally lower paid women moving back to the home to perform unwaged labour also reinvigorates traditional gender relations with a neo-liberal logic of rational choice.

In, against and beyond the social wage

Among the demands for childcare in the 60s and 70s was the demand for community run and controlled nurseries. Feminists who struggled over questions of childcare and campaigned for community control of nurseries won this demand with varying degrees of success. To be sure, these nurseries have their problems. Like much of the labour involved in providing social services, looking after children is demanding, underpaid and undervalued. People’s capacity to care and love is relied upon and it often means people accept conditions they might not otherwise. To begin to navigate a path of resistance out of the current crisis, we need to return to the question of what kind of reproduction we want.

For the nursery campaign in Hackney, this will mean reinvigorating the community nursery sector. Community nurseries need to not just be defended but expanded, with the state footing the bill. The question of work needs to be at the centre of our struggles – waged and unwaged, concerning both conditions and compensation. But this must take place at a general level across all social provision of services, and not be allowed to become a question of shifting resources from one group of workers to another. And this demand must take place in a broader conversation about care – what is it, where does it happen and who does it. It is within this conversation that the question of the social wage can be raised once more from its starting point – as wages for the wageless.

More generally there is an urgent need to refocus anti-cuts campaigns around the question of our material reproduction and place demands for control at the heart of them. Here, ironically, the Big Society’s rhetoric of mutualism could be used tactically. Clearly the ConDems see this aspect of their project as merely the means to both “do more with less” (by doing more through unpaid community labour) and forcing workers and communities to implement their own cuts (by giving them much reduced budgets to work with). However by starting from the idea of worker-user alliances, there is a possibility of constructing a social force powerful enough to resist funding cuts and create worker-user alliances that co-manage and co-control public services. By forcing the state to continue to fund our material reproduction, and using their rhetoric to push for more control at the same time, we can attempt to ensure this crisis becomes a crisis for capitalism and the state – and not for us.

★For more info on the Hackney nurseries campaign, visit www.friendsofhackneynurseries.wordpress.com

the commune around britain

★Our conference is on 12th September, to be held in central London. Email us at uncaptiveminds@gmail.com to request an invite.

★From Meltdown to Upheaval: an assembly on the crisis. 11th September, details page 10.

★London: The Commune are at most regular demonstrations in the capital and also host our own meetings and public forums.

The next such forum is on the 1970s group Big Flame, from 7pm on Monday 30th August at the Artillery Arms, 102 Bunhill Row, near Old Street.

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

★Bristol: we are running a reading group series on “Alternatives to capitalism”. See website for details of September meeting.

★Sheffield: come to the monthly communist discussion forums, resuming in September. See website or call Barry on 07543 652629.

★North-West: we participate in the Manchester Class Struggle Forum. For details on its meetings, visit its website www.manchesterforum.org.uk

★West Midlands: call Dave on 02476 450027

★Wrexham: for info send an email to Steve at redlantern21@yahoo.co.uk

thecommune.co.uk
uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

women at the cutting edge...

Saturday 30 October 11am – 5pm

Regent St Cinema, University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London W1B 2UW

Open to people of all genders

Free creche available: please send an email to feminist.fightback@gmail.com to confirm a place

On 20 October the ConDem government’s “Spending Review” will detail enormous cuts in public services. We are already feeling the impact of earlier cuts, many effected by Labour: nurseries and libraries are closing, jobs are being lost. As the government “austerity drive” steps up, the reality is that cuts will hit the lives of all but the wealthiest. In many cases women will be hit the hardest with recent reports estimating that women will suffer 72% of the tax and benefit cuts.

Whether you’re a feminist, a trade unionist, someone affected by the cuts, or involved in fighting the

cuts in your college, community or workplace, or just interested in how the landscape of the welfare state is changing, Feminist Fightback invites you to join a day of discussions and networking.

We want to put these cuts in a political context, link up, and share ideas and skills as we plan to fight them together.

Participatory workshops on:

- ★What’s going on? Mapping cuts and campaigns;
- ★Who do the cuts affect? Why are cuts a feminist issue?;
- ★What does it mean? Demystifying the “economics of the crisis”;
- ★What do we want? Fighting within and against the state.

For more information please see www.feministfightback.org.uk, send an email to feminist.fightback@gmail.com, or call Laura on 07971 842027

no escape from theory: c

Oleg Resin draws comparisons between growing anti-cuts campaigns and the movements of the 1970s, with reference to debates over the character of the 'public sector' and whether we can harness the state.

To think that now, with cuts falling everywhere, there is no time for general discussions or to develop theory, is to artificially separate theory from action.

This is an illusory idea, for each action involves theory. To rush to the streets with STOP THE CUTS banners is hardly avoiding having a theory, it is just avoiding awareness of the theoretical assumptions that underlie this.

'Save Our Public Services'

The relations between the modern welfare state and the working classes are complicated and changing. The same people who in the 1960s were 'unmasking' the welfare state as an instrument of social control and labeled social workers as the 'soft cops', turned with the fiscal crisis in the 1970s into fierce defenders of welfare services.

This situation repeats itself today: those who dare to criticize, for example, the NHS for the way it controls our power to judge for ourselves and organise, are quickly disciplined from our own ranks for breaking the fresh united fronts against the cuts.

So what are the characteristics of the unconscious theory behind the 'anti-theoretical' activism against the cuts? It is obviously based on the positions of defense of the welfare state.

The labour movement in general, now as in the 1970s, sees the welfare state in its ideal form as a kind of political representation of the working class, as an achievement which the class has always had and should defend against the cruel laws of the economy. It claims that the 'real' state has been hijacked by the capitalist class and exercises certain functions in favour of capital, e.g. subsidising private enterprises, bailing out banks, feeding the army and police or intervening in the disputes between labour and capital. This concentration on the obvious links between capitalists and the government leads us to believe that there are still some good aspects of the state, beneficial for the working class, such as free healthcare or education.

So the labour movement, according to this theory prevalent in the campaigns against cuts, has to fight to maintain this good face of the state and eventually expand it, to the expense of the other, 'ugly', face of the state.

But are public services 'our services' because they are free and satisfy some of our needs? A functionalist version of Marxism denies these claims. It tries to show that every action of the state serves the interests of capital. From this point of view, welfare can be seen as a contribution to the productivity of a company or a national economy in a competitive environment. Employers are motivated to support a healthy, efficient and educated working class from which they can in return get more value. Whereas the state welfare's proportion of British national income in 1860 was 1-1.5%, its share grew to 24% in 1970. Half of state expenditure in the UK went to social services in 1975. That is why political economists James O'Connor and Ian Gough spoke in 1970s about the diversification of state services in three areas. The first, social investment, covers services increasing labour productivity. The second, social consumption, represents services that subsidize the reproduction costs of labour power. And finally social expenses, which they saw as aimed at maintaining the discipline of the non-working population (e.g. social work).

The State Debate: an instrument or a form of social relations?

Let us summarize. The first account (social democratic, Labourite) sees the state as ambivalent, with the potential to be transformed into proper socialism. The second approach (revolutionary, Leninist) understands the state as determined to perform certain functions for the capitalist class and the only possible transformation is the revolutionary 'smashing of the state'. What they both have in common is



you can't smash the state just like a bank's window...

that they see the state as an instrument of class rule and relatively autonomous from the economy. In the 1970s these were no abstract theses. Both theoretical approaches informed daily actions and arguments among participants in struggles of that period (e.g. the polemics around workers' control and workers' plans, the 'community politics or class struggle' debate, 'municipal socialisms', the feminist 'prefigurative' politics, etc.).

Out of these struggles but still in dialogue with the 'hard left', a new younger position was born, which might be called 'the state form' tendency. The most influential statement of this approach was probably the paper 'Capital, Crisis and the State', written in 1976 by John Holloway and Sol Picciotto for the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE).

They reproached both of the above-mentioned theoretical approaches for not seeing the state in its historical context. Basing any theory of state on the remarks of Engels' *Origins of Family, Private Property and State* was not useful, if we want to understand how the modern state works. It is not sufficient to declare the state to be an instrument of domination of one class over another. Such generalisation does not explain the particular character of the capitalist state. Its historically unique feature is its separation from the economy. Thus the political, the rule of law and abstract equality, stands in a contradiction to the economic area of class exploitation.

The proponents of the 'state form' theory criticised the functionalists for taking the fact of an external state 'intervening in the economy' for granted. This is historically unfounded since a feudal or any earlier type of state appeared to the lower classes as a unified oppressive force, integrating both economic and political moments. The economic and political position of any person in the feudal pyramid was identical. Only the development of capital as a social relationship, embodied in the free sale of labour power as a commodity, brings about the separation of the political sphere from the economic. Why? The sale and purchase of labour power has got a double character. On one hand, it is direct exploitation, violence of one class over the other. On the other hand, it is a free contract of commodity exchange, one of them being labour power. This voluntary contractual aspect is crucial, without it no sale of working time and production of capitalist value would be possible, hence no capitalism.

This makes the capitalist form of class exploitation different from the previous ones. While a feudal lord disposed of both the 'economic' and 'legal' power to keep the serf fixed to his piece of land (to maintain the reproduction of the social classes), a capitalist does not need to force a worker to stay in the job. The abstract character of labour allows for a free labour turnover. In cases when workers question their social position as a class (social reproduction is threatened) such as in strikes, road blockades or mass avoidance of work, the capitalists have 'subcontracted' the dirty use of violence to an external institution – the state. The existence of the state as an external rule of law is thus dependent on the

capital relation and the reproduction of the state depends on the reproduction of the capital relation. With the abolition of wage labour and thus capital, the external 'above our heads' state ceases to exist.

From the fact that the state is essential for the production and reproduction of capital as a social relation (via the guarantee and supervision of the contract), Holloway and Picciotto took an innovative step and proclaimed that the state is a form of social relations too. They built on Marx's unique approach to classical categories of political economy (capital, money, wage, credit, rent, etc.) which saw them as fetishized separate objects and at the same time as internally connected forms of social relationships. 'The process of capitalist production gives rise to formations, in which the vein of internal connections is increasingly lost, the production relations are rendered independent of one another and the component values become ossified into forms independent of one another' (*Capital*, Vol. III, p. 828)

Like other social forms, the state too exists in its double dimension – as a social form and as a fetishized thing (the state apparatus) at the same time.

In and Against the State

In 1979 one CSE study group published the book 'In and Against the State' which elaborated an anti-state theory down to the level of strategies and real experiences of state workers and their clients. Community groups, service users, tenants, trade unions, etc. in the UK at that time were demanding various forms of state intervention. The most common demands were to improve social service provision (homeless, youth, access to council housing, etc.) and to stop bureaucratic or humiliating forms of the existing provision such as housing waiting lists, means-testing, delays in benefits, non-cohabitation rules for single mothers, etc. Community and social workers were among those best placed to see how any state-led solutions actually deepened working class dependency on the state. For example new legal advice centres had been opened on estates but the casework form of state intervention was fragmenting the response of working class people into following individual procedures. Radical community workers were often instrumental in this. How to be an anti-capitalist directly at work, if you are a teacher, nurse, social or community worker employed by the state?

'In and Against the State' creatively assimilated the dual perspective of the state as a social form and an apparatus ('the fossil of previous class struggles'): "The problem of working in and against the State is precisely the problem of turning our routine contact with the State apparatus against the form of social relations which the apparatus is trying to impose upon our actions." The welfare state is seen not as a meta-structure imposing external constraints on our agency, but as a flexible result of constant class struggle, of everyday state activity as well as activity of the working

Cuts and the state debate

class in general and state workers in particular. The state apparatus as a flow of state activity constantly divides the working class by imposing state definitions and multiple cross-class identities (citizen, worker, receiver of benefits, voter, tax payer, service user, pensioner, etc.). They proposed oppositional strategies for state workers: overcoming individualisation, rejecting misleading categories, defending ourselves in class terms, defining our problem our way, stepping outside the brief, rejecting managerial priorities, alternative organisation in struggle. Again, no chance to go into more detail here!

Conclusions

The movement against the cuts, which is now just beginning, seems to be built on a very similar model as the movement against the cuts in the 1970s (culminating in an 80,000 strong mass lobby of Parliament on 17th November 1976). The earlier movement was defeated (£3bn of cuts announced in December 1976). The present movement is even more fragmented and the numbers of activists are much smaller, so why should the outcome be different?

Apart from the numbers' issue, the typical demands coming from the left are surprisingly limited: taxing financial transactions, nationalisation, workers' control over banks and the strategic economy, support for productive capital, protectionism, cutting military budgets, green jobs, the cooperative or social economy, etc.

I see the major weakness of these demands in the fact that they remain within the state and they are dependent on the capitalist state. They affirm the state and the division between the political and the economic. If we take the separation 'politics/economics' or 'private/public' ('base/superstructure' model) as our starting underlying assumption, we impose limits on our future resistance. So we constrain ourselves within the limits of state and the production of value.

We are losing sight of any communist tendency in the material struggle against the changing state. The left sends as a signal to the working class: 'you folks may experience your everyday problems with jobs, debts, housing or prices in their unity – as one shitty life – but we, along with the state, will continue to channel your struggles into two separate forms and prevent you from challenging the organisation of society as a whole'.

Seeing the state as a form of social relations means that its development can be grasped only as a moment of a development of the totality of social relations, with their core cen-

tered in the changing mode of production. This might help to understand the apparent paradoxes of the austerity regimes: Why does the local state in the Wirral want to save £8 million on service provision but is going to invest £20 million in new buildings providing centralised and more automated services? What about the similar paradox in the Royal Mail? If the state is seen not as an agent of this broader restructuring (thus a target that can be pushed or replaced by the popular mobilisation) but as its necessary part and precondition, we start to pose a deeper question of a movement against restructuring, against commodification of our social relations as such. Such a perspective allows us to see real material links between state workers and private sector workers, between the productive and service sectors, much better than the rhetorical expressions of solidarity between the fragmented unions.

It's not easy to say what the role of communists in the present limited movement should be. I think that some of the questions and conclusions of the above mentioned state debate from the 1970s provide a useful theoretical framework that might help to avoid the political trap of the minimum consensus programmes – defend the services, join the union... (Of course, the state changed massively within the last 30 years, especially under the New Labour: the even more perfect integration of trade unions, new divisions inside the working class, new services and needs covered by the state, insertion of capital circuits into the service provision, workfare programmes, etc. What are the exact changes and their implications for the struggle against the austerity regimes?)

As I have tried to show, Holloway and Picciotto saw the state as a form of the social relations of capital. This approach allows us to see the state above society as a historical, temporary relation, conditioned by the existence of capital. It provides our subjective desires for living in a society without oppression with a solid materialist theory.

But why should a society without state and classes be desirable for everybody living from their own work? In the UK people have been shaped by the 'good' old days of the welfare state. They still remember it and if pushed to choose between a communist experiment or the stability of the old days, the decision would be obvious. However, the crisis in 2010 is different from 1979 and the 'C' word has more meanings today.

Whilst the idea of a return to the welfare society might be very common, it seems an unlikely option for the world organised by capital. As Sander from *Internationalist Perspective* points out [1], the austerity measures will just increase

productive overcapacity worldwide, only pushing capital into more speculation again, into new financial bubbles, new debts and more austerity again. He thinks that one survival measure for capital will be to raise profits by lowering wages. This means increasing the numbers of working class across the world, creating an oversupply of labour power on the world market and pushing wages under the value of labour power. 'The fact that paying wages under the value of labour power destroys labour power is not a limit when that labour power is abundant. As any overproduced commodity, labour power must devalorise. This cannot be resisted from within the logic of capital. Resisting thus becomes in practice refusing to be a commodity, rejecting the value-form.'

I like his approach for it connects a pessimistic analysis of the crisis with an argument for communism. It is put forward as a material necessity rather than previous well-known appeals to the 'dialectical' progress of history.

Even if Sander was wrong, I find this an inspiring attempt to root the case for communism in the heart of the present 'meltdown' which allows us to develop a series of immediate communist arguments within the movement against cuts. We need this new language, clear and powerful images against wage labour, that we could help circulate through the waves of struggle: talking directly to proletarian hearts, bypassing the traditional Labour/left filters and defenses.

I think that a communist intervention should be informed by the two, already mentioned, theoretical inputs.

First, that putting any defensive demands to the state means moving between the categories of the political and economic or base/superstructure and staying within the cycle of bourgeois forms and life under capital. It's the job of others, not communists, to do so!

And second, that the return to the Keynesian state is no more possible and that the future survival of humans is conditioned on our collective refusal to act as commodities on the labour market.

Let me finish with a speculation that while the first insight was theoretically and practically proven by the state debate and the defeat of the European class-based social movements at the end of the 1970s, the second thesis has to be fought for and practically proven to be true in the here and now, given the general capitalist and environmental mayhem facing us.

[1] See 'Artificial Scarcity in a World of Overproduction: An Escape that Isn't', at metamute.org

proposed principles for anti-cuts campaigns

Dave Spencer has advanced this piece on how we should approach the fight against cuts as a motion to The Commune's forthcoming conference.

The Coalition government has made a conscious political decision to attack public sector workers and public services. The attack might well be compared to Thatcher's attack on the miners in the 1980s. The aim is to sell off public assets and privatise services and to discipline the working class. The political basis is classical neo-liberalism, Thatcherite, IMF Washington Consensus, discipline of the markets and market forces, There Is No Alternative etc.

Any response from the working class must therefore also become political/ideological and not just defensive. Militancy will not be enough, as it wasn't for the miners. For us this means devising theoretical and practical ways of building communism and building it from below, meaning under workers' and community control.

Unfortunately the Anti-Cuts Campaigns set up in local areas are likely to be dominated by a) Labour Party MPs and councillors together with Trade Union bureaucrats whose main practical concern will be winning Council seats and a Labour victory in 2015 – and b) local representatives of the left groups who will be on fishing expeditions for members



an anti-tory graphic on the labour party website: they will try and 'capture' the movement against the cuts to win votes

and who will present themselves as the elite leadership of the Campaigns.

The political line of these people will be reformist and Keynesian. We must remember that both of these groups failed to build an alternative to New Labour over 13 years and in the case of the Socialist Workers' Party and Socialist Party actively sabotaged the Socialist Alliance and the Scottish Socialist Party. They will be unable to form the broad, open and democratic movement that is required. This will present genuine militants with a dilemma. It is to be hoped that the movement will build up such a momentum that the people above will be swamped.

Within local Anti-Cuts Committees and within any national networks or organisations we should make sure that democratic methods are applied - no slates [1], no take-overs.

We should also argue to turn the Committees outwards to make contact with the working class—in their workplaces, community groups and estates. Workplace bulletins along the lines of *Lutte Ouvrière* [2], stalls in shopping centres like the SP do, setting up federations of residents' groups - any such methods could be used. A crucial method should be an emphasis on the local government elections next May.

Organise candidates from the Campaigns to be put forward in local wards, avoid clashes between different left groups. Organise groups of people to go out regularly canvassing, asking the working class what is happening, what they are thinking and what needs to be done in their area. To be done properly, this needs to be done *now*, not three weeks before the election. It is a medium-term strategy, thinking of the general election in 2015 (or before). Elections are a way of getting your voice heard.

[1] a reference to the practice of proposing a 'slate' of candidates for election, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, as opposed to electing individuals.

[2] A sizeable French Trotskyist group renowned for its production of bulletins covering particular workplace news as well as wider politics.

potere operaio: the last firebrands

In August we staged a series of forums on what we can learn from past communist organisations. Martine Bourne reports on the discussion about Italian group Potere Operaio

Potere Operaio (Workers Power) were the focus of the second meeting of the series organised by the London group on communist organisation and class struggle. Potere Operaio emerged in 1967 as a grouping operating independently of the trade union movement. They stood as a faction within the Communist Party-led CGIL trade union during internal elections at the Petrolchimico company based in the industrial zone of Venice, Porto Marghera. From here they built themselves into a national organisation which at their high point had 10,000 activists, but by 1973 had split.

Italy had come out of the Second World War defeated and went about rebuilding its economy and moving away from small scale workshops to mass production factories. The Communist Party of Italy (PCI) played its part assisting in the disarming of the anti-fascist resistance and supporting the restructuring of industry. This represented the origin of the post war crisis in the PCI. With Stalin surrendering Western Europe to US influence, the PCI on the one hand accommodated itself to the Italian state, while experiencing marginalisation under US pressure to separate the trade union movement into political unions to distance communist militants from the rest of the working class.

The PCI was pessimistic about the new industrial workers, who migrated from the countryside to the industrial zones, believing they lack the required class consciousness of the older generation. The other significant event to shake not only the PCI, but all communist parties in Western Europe was the 1956 Hungarian Uprising when workers councils were established before being quickly stifled by 'Soviet' military intervention. The crisis and compromise of the PCI provided space for Potere Operaio (PO) and other groups like Lotta Continua (Permanent Struggle) to develop theory and organisation within the vacuum.

From the beginning PO were influenced and worked with leftist intellectuals. The most notable being Antonio Negri.



potere operaio sought to organise above and beyond workplace and trade union structures

Negri was critical of both the unions and the leftist parties for their participation in the restructuring of Italy. What Negri argued was required was the party of insurrection to resolve the conflict between workers and the state. While Negri's writings have been translated into English, those of the workers within PO have not. This is a pity as it would have given a voice to the organisation's workplace activists and a greater insight into their practice.

From the Porto Marghera base Potere Operaio linked up with other like minded groups that by 1969 formed a national organisation and paper. While Negri wanted to build the organisation there was a tension with the workplace militants who focused on the economic struggle. The CGIL expelled the PO activists from the union as they would not toe the union line. This allowed for the development of autonomous workers bodies free of the unions. This gave PO the space to develop their practice.

They tried to move away from union and political party model of organising and representing workers interests to encouraging workers themselves to take the initiative. The demand for flat rate pay increases sought to break down the hierarchical pay and grade structures and sectionalism between blue and white collared workers which assisted the employers and the unions to divide the workforce on narrow sectional lines. 'Less work, more wages' was a slogan adopted to distinguish themselves from the unions and that

'too much work kills' which was literally true in the chemical industry.

Negri's desire to develop the existing organisation into an insurrectionary party saw Potere Operaio organise on the 'terrain' outside of the factory. There were campaigns to drive down transport costs, rents, electricity bills, wages for housework, squatting empty houses and mass shoplifting. But what was cost of all this activity?

A clip of a DVD, "Porto Marghera - The Last of the Firebrands", the story of Potere Operaio, was shown giving the human side of the struggle. Augusto Finzi, one of the activists in the Petrolchimico plant spoke of the time that work and political activity took him away from his wife and child which led them to split-up. The activist culture mirrored the factory in that people did not exist beyond their usefulness to the project. And then work making people sick through poor health and safety and the employer's own health checks used to get rid of workers. Finzi's own experience led him to his own interest in herbal medicines and healthy foods to counter the damaging health impacts of work, chemicals and poor diet.

The trajectories of Finzi and Negri explain why Potere Operaio split as a national organisation in 1973. Finzi favoured an autonomous workers organisation and opposed taking up arms. Negri favoured a 'Leninist' insurrectionary party. Events speeded up and some former members of PO took up the armed struggle with the Red Brigades and Prima Linea. The Italian secret state adopted the 'Strategy of tension' using the secret service and their Gladio network with fascist elements to create an environment potentially conducive to a right-wing coup. With this followed waves of repression against PO activists and others. Both Finzi and Negri found themselves imprisoned in 1979 due to the activities of the Red Brigades.

Potere Operaio's legacy for communists today is not only the need to be able to operate independently of the trade unions within the workplace and take the struggle into the community, but also the need to ask ourselves whether own practices mirror the exploitative values we are striving to replace.

Further reading: Steve Wright, *Storming heaven: A theoretical history of Operaism*, Pluto Press, 1992.

»»» FROM MELTDOWN TO UPHEAVAL »»»

A Conference of Working-Class Reflection and Action, London, Saturday September 11th

The Commune are hosting a conference to debate the effects of the crisis, the existing resistance and the questions it raises regarding how we organise.

All welcome. We will be soliciting and publishing local and industry-specific reports in the lead-up to the event, see www.thecommune.co.uk for example reports and a local questionnaire. Workshop details below.

Invitation

The global crisis has lost its bubble form: the announcement of austerity measures, the first waves of mass struggle in Greece and the calls for a general strike in Spain have revealed its antagonistic class core. These mass protests are an expression of wider social unrest, but so far the protests remain on the level of 'victimhood of cuts' and 'institutional mobilisations'.

As working class revolutionaries we want to discover and support the new forms of antagonistic self-organisation, direct appropriation and communist practice within these mobilisations – and their repercussions and impulses within workplaces and working-class living areas.

Only if based on daily working-class reality and self-activity can the unrest can go beyond a delegated expression of discontent and become a search for a new society.

There is no lack of leftist conferences, most of them focussing on interpretations of the crisis or proposing new campaigns. We want to focus this conference on the debate of social experience and political practice in times of crisis: how does the crisis impact on our social reality, e.g. at work, in working-class life, in the political scene? how does it change and challenge our political efforts? We plan to run the conference along four main threads.

1. The Global Crisis

The first thread evolves around a common reflection of the current stage of crisis and class movements. We will try to go beyond a superficial celebration of 'general strikes' and 'mass demonstrations', but try to understand the tendencies of proletarian self-activity within. From PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain) to global wildcats.

2. The Local Impact

The second thread will depend largely on the preparation we all do. We will ask people to write up and present short reports about the local impact of the crisis in their respective towns, about struggles which emerge in response and about how the left reacts to these new conditions – hopefully with reports about new initiatives and social experiences.

- 'The current struggle against job cuts and factory closures'
- 'Workplace reports: crisis and re-structuring'
- 'The impact of the crisis on housing and public services'
- 'Is the university a factory?'
- 'Effects of the crisis on the unemployed and the benefits regime'

3. The Practical Steps

Revolutionary activity has to be reflection in practical terms, analysis in action. We want to discuss about the role of, e.g. solidarity groups during work-place struggles (Vestas, Visteon etc.), about the importance and from of independent publications (*The Commune*, *The Catalyst*, *Libcom* etc.).

We want to debate how the crisis will change and challenge our 'social issue'-activities, e.g. around housing, benefit ad-

vice, squatting. So far work 'with' migrant workers, tenants, claimants, neighbourhood inhabitants, co-workers etc. have sat side-by-side – we want to try to debate our experiences as part of class totality in today's wider social context.

Workshops on:

- 'How to form workplace collectives'
- 'How to support ongoing struggles: strikers, migrants and tenants'
- 'Means of intervention and generalisation: the role of publications, an online presence, workplace bulletins and local papers'
- 'How to do interviews and reports'
- Solidarity networks: an assessment of the current state and role of the 'really-existing rank-and-file' (shop-stewards, tenants' associations etc.)

4. Future Coordination

We hope that the debates during the conference can result in some basic forms of future collaboration. This could take the form of committees which can hopefully continue the debate started during the conference.

This could happen e.g. by collecting regular updates and reports about the local crisis and struggle – for general circulation; of detailed 'work-place interviews' with people in our political scene; or a committee engaged in putting together a basic pamphlet around the question of 'how to struggle against job cuts', which could be adapted for particular local cases.

**10am-7pm on September 11th @
LARC, Fieldgate St, London E1.**

a syndicalism for the 21st century?

Sheila Cohen looks at the Great Unrest and the meaning for syndicalism today

It seems unlikely that the centenary of the 1910-14 Great Unrest will gain much attention in the media – if, indeed, it gets a mention at all. But, for supporters of workers' revolutionary self-activity, this is an anniversary to remember.

The Workers' Struggle

This largely unpredictable outburst of conflict began in September 1910 when miners in the South Wales coalfield embarked on an extended series of strikes sparked by the problems faced by piece-rate miners working unproductive seams. Their anger was intensified by the employers' withdrawal of miners' customary rights to use "waste wood" from the pit.

As the miners' struggle subsided, another front opened amongst seamen, dockers and railway workers in the transport strikes of 1911. The virulent anti-unionism of the Shipping Federation in the face of demands for recognition stoked largely unofficial conflict over pay when Southampton seafarers refused to board ship unless their wages were increased. The action spread to Hull, Goole, Manchester and Liverpool, and soon extended to dockers, many of whom shared the same draconian employer. Groups of factory workers from the area joined in with demands centring on wages and union recognition.

At the same time as strikes were spreading in the North, a new outbreak of unrest exploded among London dockers. Here the employers, intimidated by the unrest, offered more generous agreements, but the mood of militancy had spread, with dockers rejecting a significant pay increase; as Ben Tillet wrote, "They wanted more..."

As the London dock strike subsided, unofficial action by railway workers on Merseyside began, sparked by static wages and the slow-moving "conciliation" system for dealing with disputes. In August 1911, goods rail workers, whose work in dockland railway depots meant close connections with dockers and seafarers, walked out. Before long an unofficial strike committee had been convened and rapidly set about organising sympathy strikes by other transport workers. By 10th August 15,000 railway workers were on strike, along with thousands of dockers, carters and local municipal workers out on their behalf. The Shipping Federation imposed a lockout, but this simply provoked a general strike call from the committee. Within a week the numbers on strike had risen to about 70,000.

This strike wave took on an increasingly violent character, with mass pickets attacking scab workers and sabotaging goods. The strike committee eventually managed to gain some control with a system of official permits which brought a "dual power" aspect to the dispute with organisations from the Post Office to the Canadian Pacific Railway Company obliged to seek permission to move goods. Large bodies of troops and police were called in to control the strikers, while traditional hostilities between Catholics and Protestants disappeared as the whole working class of Merseyside united in struggle.

On 13th August – "Bloody Sunday" – a mass labour demonstration of 80,000 workers, including women and children, was violently dispersed by police and troops. Workers from Liverpool's North End fought bitterly to keep the army and police out of their communities; the "guerrilla warfare", as the *Times* called it, continued for days, with the use of barricades and other classic insurrectionary tactics. When the embattled strikers attacked prison vans transporting convicted rioters, the struggle climaxed with the fatal shooting of two strikers. After another ten days of sporadic conflict, the mass strike was over.

Yet the strike wave continued, shifting back to the mining industry in the winter of 1911-2 as a month-long strike took place for a minimum wage. This relatively "official" demand was supported by the union leadership, but the decision to strike came from local mining activists mostly still concentrated in the South Wales coalfields but now spreading to Northumbria and Durham. Direct action in the North East coalfield triggered the rapid deployment of troops to mining areas. Even when the government passed a Minimum Wages Act, apparently addressing one of the miners' central demands, militancy only increased, at least partly because of the act's inadequacies. It was only in April that the last bastions of resistance against a settlement reluctantly agreed to return to work.

In June and July 1912, yet another dock strike broke out in London, characterised by massive marches from the East

End into central London which recalled those of the historic 1889 strike for a decent wage, the so-called "dockers' tanner". On the docks themselves, armed battles took place between strikers and scabs, expressing a bitterness which intensified as the employers refused any concessions. The strike's eventual collapse at the end of July was due largely to this employer intransigence, but lack of solidarity from the provinces was another factor. At the same time, the continued vitality of the Great Unrest was indicated by a strike by Merseyside dockers in July 1912, the same month the London dock strike ended.

"The delegate-based structures of the workplace committees set up on the Clyde and beyond allowed for forms of direct democracy and independence from trade union officialdom crucial to the beginnings of consciously revolutionary organisation amongst rank and file workers."

In 1913 and 1914, unrest broke out in unrelated areas, primarily engineering and building but also amongst agricultural labourers, municipal employees and china clay workers. In the Leeds Corporation strike of 1913, strikers sabotaged the city's electricity supply, while violent conflict between police and strikers marked the Cornish china clay workers' struggle the same year. The building trade, also widely affected by deskilling, was the next combatant in the battle. This time the conflict culminated in a lockout rather than a strike; the employers had learnt their lesson.

Presaging their later dominance in First World War struggles, however, it was engineering workers who dominated the latter two years of the Great Unrest. Much of the conflict took the form of small localised strikes over issues like bonus payments and working patterns, but the underlying significance of the unrest was epitomised in a major strike wave in the Black Country in which semi-skilled, unskilled and female engineering workers mobilised to demand union recognition and a minimum wage. The scale of the unrest was reflected in local militants' description of the strike as "the last dying struggle of capitalism"; members were urged to fight "not for two bob a week...but the world for the workers" (quoted from the syndicalist magazine *Solidarity*).

But perhaps the most potentially revolutionary episode of the Great Unrest occurred among transport workers in Dublin. The strikes began in August 1913 with tram workers literally walking off their trams, but were almost immediately converted into a lockout as punishment for the strikers' rebellion under the inspiring leadership of syndicalist and socialist James Larkin. Massive solidarity was expressed by rank and file workers throughout Britain. It was only the first world war, with its jingoism and culture of "national sacrifice" which, at least temporarily, brought the strike wave to an end.

The role of syndicalism

As the above suggests, the Great Unrest was noteworthy not only for its volcanic workplace-based revolt against capital but for the role of rank and file leaders whose political philosophy extended far beyond the language of compromise and negotiation. In outlining these events, therefore, the intention is not only to draw attention to an important – and relatively neglected – episode in labour history but, of course, to examine its political significance. In doing so, pride of place must be given to the central role of syndicalism.

While one key history (Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1910-1914*) argues that the strikes themselves indicated a "proto-syndicalist mood" rather than explicit adoption of this quasi-revolutionary approach, syndicalist strategy and tactics played a key role in consolidating, organising and spreading the strike activity. Syndicalists acted as an early "Minority Movement", rendering already-existing activity more effective through promoting internal union democracy and class solidarity. In this sense "the fact that workers were often moving 'spontaneously' in a syndicalist direction helped the organised [syndicalist] movement to influence strike policy and make new recruits" (Holton, p136).

But what were the syndicalists' main objectives? Leaving aside the particular circumstances of the Great Unrest, these included an emphasis on workers' control, often in

terms of its extension to forms of direct social ownership, industrial unionism and its corollary in union amalgamation, anti-parliamentarianism and a healthy distrust of the union bureaucracy. While the conventional critique of syndicalism as neglectful of the role of the state has little foundation, a lack of full strategic awareness of the willingness and indeed ferocity of the capitalist state in mobilising for its own interest can be identified as a key weakness.

Such confusion can be argued to have prevented, perhaps even more damagingly, full analysis of the role of the supporters of that state within the labour movement. In this field, syndicalist praxis was undermined by a strategy which leaned towards attempts to influence the left wing of the union bureaucracy and push for the election of militants to union office, rather than focussing on the independence and accountability of workplace union representation. This had predictable results; as Willie Gallacher later put it, 'Every time we succeeded in making one of our own comrades an official of the trade unions, it turned out that...the trade unions corrupted our own comrades too.' Such confusions create crucial lessons for socialists' approach to organising within the trade unions today.

... For the 21st century?

Almost exactly one hundred years since the Great Unrest, syndicalist ideas continue to attract support, particularly – and valuably – amongst young activists. Is syndicalism as relevant today as in the early 1900s? And, equally importantly, does the syndicalism of the 21st century perpetuate any of the political misunderstandings and failings of its 20th-century predecessor?

The answer to the first question can only be positive. Despite all claims to the contrary, a working class still exists, still constitutes a majority of the population, and still engages in class struggle. While the struggles of 2010 can hardly be compared – so far – to those of 1910, the potential, as always, remains. The issue, as in the Great Unrest and beyond, is the relationship between such workplace-based conflict and the political ideas and policies which can lead it in a transformative direction.

Here, the lessons of the later First World War struggles can provide still more useful guidance. James Hinton's classic study, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement*, provides crucial insights into an advance beyond syndicalism towards what might be described, clumsily, as "sovietism" by the activists who led a significant revolt against capital during this period. The delegate-based structures of the workplace committees set up on the Clyde and beyond allowed for forms of direct democracy and independence from trade union officialdom crucial to the beginnings of consciously revolutionary organisation amongst rank and file workers.

The lack of unity between different sections of the working class which eventually undermined the revolutionary implications of such "sovietised" organisation should not undo the crucial class lessons of this workplace-committee-based organisation – a structure which can be, and often is, reproduced in our own times. The contrast between such structures and the more problematic assumptions of syndicalism is well expressed in Hinton's comment that the "ideological achievement" of the workers' committee movement was "to substitute the local soviet... for De Leon's national Industrial Union as the basic unit of working-class power" (p301).

"The Deriving Power"

Lessons for today? Not that syndicalism is somehow "inadequate", but that its crucial identification with the working class at its workplace can bear fruit as part of an orientation towards bringing groups of organised activists together in workplace-based and cross-workplace local committees of the type pioneered on the Clyde. Such committees might be argued to replicate Trades Councils; and yet, as J.T. Murphy rightly argued, the "essential difference" between the two was and is that "the trades council is only indirectly related to the workshop, whereas the workers' committee is directly related. The former has no power, the latter has the deriving power of the directly connected workers in the workshops."

There is very little contradiction between the identification of today's syndicalists with struggles in all sections of the working class, along with a refreshing support for direct action rather than the symbolic "campaigns" so beloved of the British labour movement, and a perspective which can begin to work with already-existing activists to magnify the class potential of everyday workplace-based struggle.

