

Bedroom tax beaten in Scotland

Socialist Party Scotland reporters

The bedroom tax has been effectively defeated in Scotland. The announcement that the Scottish government intends to end the crushing burden of the hated and reviled bedroom tax is a huge victory.

Mass campaigning, the organisation of hundreds of public meetings the length and breadth of Scotland; thousands marching on demonstrations; lobbies and protests of councils, MSPs and the Scottish government and a refusal to accept any possibility of evictions, proved an unstoppable force.

The defeat of the hated tax will also give a huge boost to campaigners in England and Wales who will step up demands for its abolition and for councils and housing associations to refuse to carry out evictions.

The Scottish government has asked the Con-Dems at Westminster to allow it to provide payments to kill off the tax for 2014/15.

Regardless of whether the Tories allow this, the money can and must be given to social landlords by the Scottish National Party (SNP) government in Scotland to write off all bedroom tax from 1 April 2013 onwards.

The Scottish government had come under enormous pressure from the anti-bedroom tax campaign that, from the start, demanded the SNP use the powers it has to scrap the tax.

The Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation, that united the majority of the local campaigns and in which Socialist Party Scotland members played a leading role, was crucial in this victory.

The campaign in Scotland will remain vigilant and will continue to fight to demand all bedroom tax debts are written off.

And that any and all legal action currently being taken by councils and housing associations, leading to possible eviction, is immediately suspended.

The campaign shows that austerity can be defeated. Imagine what could be achieved if the UK's seven million-strong trade union movement is mobilised in the form of a 24-hour general strike against all the Con-Dems' cuts.

...now let's end all council cuts

The Con-Dem government has slashed spending by over 25% to the ten most deprived areas in England which includes Manchester, Liverpool, and Hackney and Newham in east London.

The government severely cut council tax support to local authorities by £500 million last year. £100 million of this cut was deferred by transitional support arrangements which have now ended.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Trust charity the latest round of government cuts to local authorities will mean 270,000 of the poorest households (who previously could claim a full council tax rebate) seeing their council tax bills rise, on average, by £80 to £176 a year.

Currently, some 600,000 people are in council tax arrears and 500,000 have been issued with court summons for non-payment. 400,000 people have been issued with liability notices and 70,000 have received bailiff letters.

Despite shadow Labour ministers condemning this Con-Dem iniquity, Labour councils have simply passed the government's spending cuts onto the backs of their poorest residents.

Labour has failed to protect the most vulnerable, so what is the point of voting in the May elections for a party that has failed to mobilise any effective opposition to this government of brutal austerity?

Any suggestion that an incoming Labour government will reverse these cuts is wishful thinking as Ed Balls has already announced that he would stick with Chancellor Osborne's budget plans.

All the more reason why working class people should unhesitatingly cast their votes for Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition candidates (which include Socialist Party members), and also campaign for and stand as TUSC candidates themselves.

Who's robbing our NHS?

The National Health Service is under attack as never before. In this feature, a GP from north-west England looks at the effect of a huge government push for privatisation while nurse Claire Job looks at the predatory actions of the pharmaceutical industry.

Privatisation threatens health

A north west GP

As soon as the NHS was formed, it started to be undermined as a universal, comprehensive health system, free at the point of use.

But the process accelerated rapidly in recent years. The Coalition government's health and social care act (HSCA) which started being implemented last April, enshrines the complete denationalisation of our NHS.

During New Labour governments, the private sector began making more and more profit from healthcare, particularly through increased use of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

Private money has almost completely replaced Treasury or state funding of new hospitals.

There are now over 100 PFI hospitals which, combined, were built for £11 billion but will cost over £65 billion to pay off, due to interest paid to the private sector owners.

Not surprisingly, 22 PFI hospital trusts are in debt due to these schemes and making cuts to frontline services to finance the crisis they face.

Even the Commons Public Accounts Committee warned that PFI is unsustainable but the current government has signed off on over 40 new contracts with more under negotiation.

Public anger over the problems caused by PFI has increased as up and down the country trusts cut budgets and centralised services to try to make ends meet.

Campaigns have been fought to save A&E, maternity services, paediatric units and more.

But privatisation of health care runs much deeper than PFI and is accelerating at a pace. Services sold off over the past few years include medical supplies and the blood plasma service among many others.

Since the NHS was set up GPs traditionally had 'independent status' ie they were largely self-employed but with a contract with the NHS to provide medical services.

However most GPs see themselves as part of the NHS and don't generally undertake regular private work, although there are exceptions. The public too see them as part of the NHS.

Businesses

However, growing numbers of groups of GPs have come together to operate as 'businesses'. In some cases, contracts to run 'GP-led' health centres have been won by large private organisations like Care UK and Assura.

In others, 'GP-led companies' have come together perhaps seeing 'safety in numbers' in an unstable financial environment for healthcare.

They may have started with good intentions, aiming to bid more effectively for NHS contracts against the big private companies.

But the trend is towards these small companies expanding and winning contracts to run services across the country.

They then become more and more like the big corporations they compete for contracts with. They have commercial structures and are profit-making businesses, something not always obvious to patients.

This is an inevitable consequence of greater marketisation in the NHS, the pressure to compete and the fear of being taken over by giant health corporations.

The problem for these companies is that it's not that easy to make large profits from primary care.

One way to cut costs and increase profits is to cut the most expensive outlays - GPs themselves. Many centres did just that, cutting GP numbers and using nurses instead to run clinics or relying on newly qualified, cheaper 'salaried' GPs rather than GP partners.

The other risk of this kind of privatisation is that companies, realising the slim pickings on offer, can pull out or sell up to other organisations if they wish (as happened when Assura sold to Virgin).

This puts employees in an unstable position and patients having no real say about who provides their healthcare.

Other primary care services were transferred from the NHS into private hands. District nursing, care for people with learning disabilities and other community services have been transferred to be run by social enterprises or private companies.

Short term contracts

Often they have short-term contracts, again introducing instability into the system. Staff may have an initial agreement to protect pay and conditions but once this runs out, cuts will invariably be made.

In some cases, wages are slashed to almost half the levels under the NHS and private companies cut costs by bringing in more and more unqualified staff to do jobs previously done by trained nurses for example.

The budget for buying clinical services has now also been handed over to Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) run largely by groups of GPs.

In most areas contracts for various services are up for renewal and CCGs are putting these out to tender to 'Any Qualified Provider'.

The NHS Support Federation found that between April and December 2013 70% of these contracts were awarded to private organisations.

If this trend continues, large swathes of our services will soon no longer be run by the NHS.

PFI has shown that privatisation doesn't save money and can lead to financial crisis and destabilise services. Each tendering process costs money and what happens when the contract ends?

But this destabilisation is exactly what the government intends. They aim to undermine the NHS and start to develop a privately run health system based on the model of the USA, where publicly funded treatment on the NHS will be basic and people will need private health insurance to fund anything 'extra'.

This is an ideological attack on the idea of the NHS. Cameron, Clegg and Co are more interested in protecting private companies' interests than in providing a decent health care system for the majority.

We must fight this process, which is spiralling towards the end of the NHS. The health unions must come together in coordinated action to defend this treasured service.

Profit rules

Osborne and the Tories' policies represent the drive by British capitalism to use the economic crisis to dramatically lower the share taken by the working class, including the social wage - if they can, down to pre-war levels.

At the same time they hope to partially overcome the long-term problem of capitalism in this epoch: the lack of profitable fields to invest their huge profits.

They hope that the privatisation of public services, particularly the NHS and education, will provide new investment opportunities.

Big Pharma's deadly grip

Claire Job

Capitalism, a short term, money-making system, prioritises the quick quid over people's needs. For the pharmaceutical industry giants, known as Big Pharma, this means putting profit before sick and even dying people.

They hunt for profits while government health budgets are slashed worldwide and poverty hits people's lives even in the developed world.

One in three children in Britain lives in poverty yet, despite deprivation and ill-health being clearly linked, our NHS is short of staff and resources. But the drug companies focus solely on their vast profits.

The NHS's annual drugs bill is currently around £10 billion. Last July, it was discovered that large drug companies were milking the NHS of millions of pounds, using a legal loophole in the government's 'price regulatory scheme', by selling marketing rights to smaller companies.

These smaller companies, not governed by the scheme, can then set a new price, free of regulation.

The cost of one medicine went up 2,400% literally overnight. The extra cost to the NHS will be millions of pounds.

Big Pharma's profits are growing; global spending on prescriptions has more than doubled since 2002. In 2011 it reached \$954 billion.

The US market makes up about half of world spending on medicines. US workers pay massively inflated costs of medicines compared to Britain and Europe.

Blockbusters

The big pharmaceutical companies are in competition to find the next 'blockbuster' medicine ie one they can patent for 20 years.

They claim property rights over the medicine, supposedly to reclaim money spent on its research and development.

In reality, this patent lets them charge massively inflated prices for a medicine that brings in huge profits.

The current blockbuster, Humira, used to treat arthritis, is from a group of drugs called Anti-TNFs. Humira, made by Abbott, rakes in \$9.3 billion a year - estimated to rise to \$11.2 billion by 2016.

Big Pharma talk of the 1980s and 1990s as a 'golden-age' of blockbuster medicines. Many came to the end of patent in the late 2000s.

The industry has been unable to replace them in the same number, mainly because of a lack of innovation in developing medicines over the last decade.

In times of economic uncertainty Big Pharma is reluctant to risk cash on developing new medicines. Many medicines new to market treat the same condition, in the same way, as an already existing drug.

These 'me too' medicines are less risky. For example I can prescribe an analgesia called 'fentanyl' from one company as a patch, from another as a tablet and from a third as a nasal spray!

Drug companies see research and development (R&D) of new medicines as 'high risk'. Before investing in medicines, they want guaranteed big profits back.

If the financial risks are too great then R&D will not happen. In fact, a significant proportion of R&D is carried out by universities or funded by charities.

Drug companies' practices in clinical trials of medicines are notorious. In 2007 legislation was introduced to ensure 'mandatory reporting' of clinical trial data.

But a BMJ article in 2012 found this law was ignored by four out of five clinical trials. Such withholding of negative trial data exposes people to harm and prevents health professionals and patients making an informed decision about treatments.

Safety compromised

In the USA GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) had to pay \$3 billion in a 2012 settlement on charges of failure to report safety data and illegal promotion of prescription drugs.

Last year, a British GSK executive was reportedly banned from leaving China as the authorities investigated bribery charges - millions of pounds were allegedly funnelled through travel agencies to bribe doctors and health officials.

Blockbuster medicines for sale in the US and Europe ensure that diseases in the undeveloped world receive little attention.

Illnesses causing misery to millions are ignored in the chase for profit. Big Pharma's global greed puts profits before public health needs and condemns large parts of the world to illness and even death from preventable, treatable diseases.

Big Pharma threatened to withhold medicines from Greece in 2013 when the government was not paying its bills, leaving workers worrying not only about their jobs, homes and food but access to life-sustaining medicines.

Nationalising the drug companies would remove a huge parasitic drain on public health resources and would be a huge step towards letting health services be planned for need rather than profit.

Health before profits

Medicine has achieved great scientific advances but much more might be achieved if scientists were freed from the narrow parameters imposed on them by those safeguarding the profits of Big Pharma's shareholders.

Imagine what could be achieved if scientists could concentrate on the world's most pressing health problems and share results in genuine cooperation instead of jealously guarding every advance with secrecy and patents.

Tackling the development and production of medicines based on people's needs is only half the battle.

Poverty and ill health go hand in hand so we need to consider not just how we treat disease; but what should be done to prevent it.

Capitalist society will ensure that the health gap between the wealthy and the poor grows. Society needs to be run differently, planned democratically, with power in the hands of the many not the few.

People's needs should come before profit in education, jobs, homes and a healthy environment. We need the socialist transformation of society.

PFI wrecks hospitals

Andrew Walton

University Hospitals Leicester Trust has to apply for government financial support after it was forecast to go £40 million in the red this year.

It plans to cut £45 million in 2014 in a "cost improvement plan", which would sack more staff.

Portering and estates staff have already been replaced. Private company Interserve aims to cut staff costs - cutting jobs or not replacing people who leave, creating a poorer service.

So-called "backroom" staff are important in keeping hospitals clean, safe and infection-free.

Many hospitals face similar problems. Hit by exorbitant PFI deals, many involving 30-year contracts with private companies, much of the NHS is struggling financially.

The HSCA makes managers concentrate on keeping commissioners, the people who buy our service, happy. NHS staff fear their service may be taken over.

The Con-Dem government wants hospitals to become Foundation Trusts, which can be sold off to 'any willing provider'.

Private companies can cherry-pick profitable parts of the service, while the public sector deals with more complex cases.

Foundation Trusts were created under New Labour who will need to be pressurised by mass action into even repealing the Tory HSCA.

When British Rail was privatised, Labour promised to renationalise it, but went back on its word when elected.

Invest in the NHS and kick greedy fat cats out of our hospitals!

Fightback must start here!

The Socialist Party says:

- No to all cuts in jobs, services and staff pay and conditions
- Abolish the Health and Social Care Act which allows the further selling off of our NHS to private companies
- Kick the private vultures out of the NHS. End big business profiteering: ditch the Private Finance Initiative which is bleeding the NHS dry
- Nationalise the pharmaceutical industry with compensation only on the basis of proven need
- A fully publicly funded NHS, free for all at the point of use
- United action to defend every part of the NHS. The TUC must name the day for a 24-hour general strike against austerity, cuts and closures
- Fight for a socialist planned society that can maintain and exceed the original aims of the NHS

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Trade unions - time to break Labour link is now!

Is this the end for the unions and Labour?

In response to the Collins Review proposals to 'reform' the link between the unions and Labour, Mirror columnist Kevin Maguire declared: "It is time for the trade unions to march proudly out of Labour's front door instead of being slowly bundled out of the back" (3/2/14).

Labour leader Ed Miliband has said that the Collins Review proposals "complete unfinished business of the last 20 years". They are both right.

The process of undermining the voice of the trade unions within Labour began 20 years ago, under John Smith's leadership, and was accelerated under Tony Blair.

Today, before the Collins Review, "unions have less influence over selection [of candidates] than they have had in 100 years", as Tom Watson MP put it (Guardian, 16/8/13).

However, if implemented, the Collins Review will mean the destruction of the last remnants of the trade unions' organised presence within the Labour Party.

Far from letting "people back into politics" as Miliband claims, this will conclude the already advanced transformation of Labour into one more party of big business.

Maguire continues: "Rather than enduring a thousand indignities, organised labour should take its money and people and abandon institutional links with the party it fathered, nurtured and continues to sustain.

"However Ed Miliband dresses up these far-reaching reforms, which were triggered by his blind panic over the selection of a parliamentary candidate in Falkirk, truth is he wants union cash but not the unions.

"The Labour leader elected on the back of members is terrified of the 'red Ed' tag, never forgiving those who awarded him the top job."

Until now Kevin Maguire has defended the idea that Labour gives trade unionists a voice via the union link, but now feels he can no longer do so.

Many trade unionists will no doubt feel the same. The Collins Review comes after the Falkirk fiasco, where Miliband's response to Unite's attempts to democratically influence the selection of a parliamentary candidate was disgracefully to call in the police to investigate. Now, it appears no case was found but Miliband refuses to release the report.

Capitalists' bidding

Kevin Maguire goes on to report that, "votes were fixed weeks ago to pass Miliband's package at this week's meeting of Labour's national executive committee and a shamefully short two-hour conference on St David's Day".

There is no doubt that there have been weeks of haggling behind the scenes in order to try to come up with a deal which Miliband hopes will mollify the demands of the capitalist class and Tory Party, but which the trade union leaders also feel able to vote for.

Of course, no matter what anti-union measures Miliband takes, the capitalists and the Tories will always demand more.

As Maguire puts it, Miliband is, "in La-La land if he thinks anything short of outlawing union membership and transporting activists to Australia would end Tory smears." Nonetheless, these proposals are what the capitalists have been baying for, and trade union leaders should vote en masse against them. The few crumbs that have been offered do nothing to change the fundamentals.

It is true that the unions will still have 49% of the vote at the conference - a concession Miliband could give because the conference has long been completely toothless.

The Labour leadership's immediate dismissal of the 2013 conference's vote in favour of renationalisation of Royal Mail is an example of this.

But even maintaining the 49% of the vote is only for the next five years, and the share of the vote going to different unions will be adjusted in the meantime on the basis of how many individuals in each trade union choose to become 'associate members' of the Labour Party.

The selection of the party leader, however, will now be conducted purely on the basis of One Member One Vote (OMOV) with no collective voice for the unions.

When OMOV began to be introduced, 20 years ago, John Prescott correctly said it was more important than the abolition of Clause IV in the process of moving Labour to the right.

OMOV meant using a passive membership - sitting at home and seeing debates within the party via the capitalist media - against the more active layers who participated in the democratic structures of the party.

At that time the union block at conference was reduced from 90% to 49%. Now the collective voice of the unions within the party is being reformed out of existence.

In the past the organised working class had been able to put pressure on the Labour leadership via the block vote.

It is true, of course, that right-wing union leaders often wielded it against their own members' interests.

That is why we called - as part of our programme for democratic, fighting unions - for democratic trade union checks over the block vote.

Nonetheless, the reduction of the block vote was an essential part of transforming Labour into a qualitatively different, capitalist party.

Not only will the leadership election be conducted on the basis of OMOV, to get on the ballot paper will require the support of 15% of MPs, compared to the current 12.5%, which in turn was increased from 5% in 1988 in order to prevent Tony Benn getting on the ballot paper.

In the last leadership election even the 12.5% bar prevented John McDonnell MP from getting on the ballot paper despite having the support of wide swathes of the trade union movement, including being endorsed by the national conference of Unite, the biggest trade union in Britain.

This is the reality of Miliband's supposed 'opening up of the party to the people' - a workers' organisation of over one million members is debarred from being able to vote for their candidate because of the right-wing views of a few hundred Labour MPs.

Oppose Collins review

To date most of the trade union leaders have remained quiet on the Collins proposals. The Labour leadership will be demanding that they toe the line in order to prevent 'disunity' ruining Labour's chances at the general election.

This is nonsense. The Labour leadership didn't worry about unity when it launched an all-out assault on the unions within the Labour Party including calling the police in to investigate!

And if Labour fails to win the election it will not be because the party is seen as divided, but because it is putting forward policies that are no different, in essence, from those of the Con-Dems.

Putting "a red rose on austerity", as Kevin Maguire puts it, does not help win elections.

Members of the affiliated unions should call for their union's representatives at the Special Labour conference on 1 March to vote against the Collins Review and to demand that Labour adopts anti-austerity and socialist policies.

If, as seems likely, the Collins Review is passed however, the trade union movement needs to draw the necessary conclusions and immediately call a conference to discuss launching a new mass workers' party, which stands clearly against austerity and for workers' interests.

Kevin Maguire points out that the left-wing unions could have the resources to start a new party, but argues that "creating a Ukip of the left would be self-defeating for trade unions".

Of course this is not an accurate description of a new workers' party. But the fear of Ukip has pushed the Tories towards the right whereas the best efforts of the Labour left have been able to do nothing to push Labour to the left. On the contrary, Labour politicians appear hell-bent on out-Torying the Tories.

Labour attacks

Rachel Reeves' call for benefit claimants to have their benefit stopped if they can't pass exams in maths, English and IT came hard on the heels of Tristram Hunt's support for academies and attacks on teachers' rights.

Ed Balls met Osborne's announcements of £25 billion extra cuts, not with outrage but with an earnest reiteration of Labour's pledge to match Coalition pledges on cuts in its first year in office.

What would be self-defeating and unacceptable to trade unionists is for the trade unions to continue to fund Labour despite getting nothing in return.

This has long been the case with the Democrats in the US, although that is beginning to change, as the election of Socialist Alternative candidate Kshama Sawant in Seattle has shown.

In Britain, however, where the whole history of the Labour Party is of a party based on the trade unions, this proposal will create outrage from trade unionists, particularly beyond the general election.

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), in which we participate, is preparing the ground for a new mass workers' party, gathering around it those forces that see the need for a working class alternative, including the transport workers' union, the RMT.

The challenge TUSC is mounting in this May's local authority elections will be the biggest left challenge for generations. We appeal to all trade unionists furious at the Collins Review to join us.

Labour taxing the rich? Balls

Simon Carter

Labour's shadow chancellor, Ed Balls, has incurred the wrath of the super-rich with his timid proposal that an incoming Labour government would increase the top rate of income tax for those earning over £150,000 a year from 45% back up to 50%.

Almost immediately after announcing this policy Balls was backpedalling, saying the 50p rate was only temporary and a maximum, in order to reassure the wealthy that he and Labour were not "anti-business" - as if anyone was in any doubt!

Meanwhile, Chancellor George Osborne revealed he has no qualms about supporting the mega-wealthy by hinting that the richest income earners could see their tax bill cut again under the Tories, from 45% to 40%.

Business experts dismiss the efficacy of Ball's proposal by saying the tax take will be minimal. But this is because it represents a tiny rise in income tax as opposed to a comprehensive and progressive wealth tax.

Moreover, the super-rich employ an army of accountants to avoid paying billions, often using offshore tax havens.

Many of these gaping tax loopholes were left open by previous Labour governments and are being maintained by Osborne and Co, despite Prime Minister Cameron's much vaunted G8 summit pledge last year to tackle international tax avoidance.

Labour's timid tax measures will not provide the resources to lift millions out of poverty nor provide long-term increased funding for public services.

To achieve that a socialist plan of economic production would be needed through the nationalisation of the major corporations and banks, under democratic workers' control and management.

Them & Us

Poor get poorer

We're still paying for the bankers' and capitalist crisis. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) reckons that average household incomes, which have fallen 6% since the 2008 financial crash, were "highly unlikely" to recover to pre-crisis levels by 2015-16 because of government spending cuts and wage freezes.

The IFS did hold out a crumb of comfort to the Tories saying that better-off households had seen bigger proportionate falls in incomes than poorer ones.

However, apart from the fact that the rich are still rich, the IFS says at the same time that the poorest households have been disproportionately hammered by rampant food and energy costs which have risen 30% and 60% respectively.

Expanding misery

The government boasts of increasing employment in an expanding economy. Of course, many of these new jobs are not higher-paid skilled manufacturing jobs but are zero-hour, temporary, low-skilled, and low-waged.

Another statistic undermining the government's rosy optimism is the huge rise in self-employment. The TUC reckons that around 540,000 of the, roughly, one million jobs created since 2008 have been self-employed.

But the majority of these are not flourishing entrepreneurs but odd-job people whose income levels have collapsed by 20% since 2006.

Bullying councils

A Citizens Advice report says councils are allowing bailiffs to bully tenants when collecting council tax debts.

A 10% cut in government funding of local authorities has typically been passed on to low-income residents through reductions in council tax benefit. Consequently council tax arrears have soared.

The Citizens Advice survey found that 38% of those with council tax debts were charged fees for visits bailiffs never made and 40% were threatened with the removal of items that did not belong to them.

Bedroom tax diatribe

A chastened housing minister, Kris Hopkins, described a United Nations report calling for the abolition of the government's 'bedroom tax', as "misleading Marxist diatribe".

It's not a requirement to be a Marxist to criticise the tax as a vicious attack on the poorest and most vulnerable people.

Being a Marxist does, however, equip people with the ideas to overthrow his system of class-baiting millionaires.

Crime and punishment

The latest reactionary twaddle (sorry, "advice") to teachers from Michael Gove, the 'Tory libertarian' minister currently dismantling public education, is how to maintain classroom discipline.

His missive on tackling pupils' bad behaviour includes punishments such as weeding school grounds, tidying classrooms and writing lines.

Teachers have pointed out that many of the deterrents are already used and they did not need "one-size-fits-all advice".

But hang-on a moment, why not apply similar measures to errant investment bankers and greedy corporate fat cats? Get them to visit everyone whose lives have been wrecked by their 'bad behaviour' and get them to do the gardening, paint and decorate homes and deliver a hand-written apology.

Sochi winter Olympics - -breaking all records!

Rob Jones, Moscow

When the International Olympic Committee awarded the 2014 winter Olympics to the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, eyebrows were raised at the cost of \$12 billion.

Now it has been revealed that \$50 billion has been spent, more than the cost of all previous winter games taken together.

A 30-mile road-rail link from Sochi up to the ski-slopes has been built that is so expensive that one Russian magazine said it would have been cheaper to surface the road with caviar than asphalt!

Corruption

Mushrooming corruption has plagued the project. The contract for the biathlon facilities was awarded to the company "Rosengineering", owned by Premier Medvedev's ski constructor, which also has one of President Putin's judo sparring partners on the board of directors. This is one of many examples.

Although Russia promised that 40% of investment would come from private funds, big business has stumped up less than \$1.5 billion. 96% of the costs have come from state resources. But private business still reaps the rewards.

The Monarch Construction Company part-owned by the son of vice-president of the state Olympic company is investing just 14% of the \$145 million cost of the main IOC office in Sochi, but has been promised ownership of the building after the games.

The games are intended mainly for Russia's new elite. Tickets to the opening night cost between £350 and £900 - 50% of Russians earn less than £350 a month.

The Russian government, contradicting the 'Olympic spirit', is offering each Russian gold medallist in Sochi \$122,500.

The people who pay for this are, of course, ordinary Russians and in particular those who worked on the Olympic sites and local residents.

Most construction work has been done by cheap "migrant" labour. The word "migrant" in Russia applies to those travelling from other regions within the country.

Workers' rights have been widely ignored during the construction. Wages have often not been paid or payment severely delayed, long overtime and holidays have been worked with no extra pay.

At least 25 workers have been killed in industrial accidents during the site construction. These are not isolated incidents but have arisen because the government passed a law removing all responsibilities on employers to pay minimum wage rates and ensure health and safety on Olympic sites.

The environment has been badly damaged. In addition Sochi, with a sub-tropical climate, is about the only part of Russia that does not have a guaranteed snowfall.

Not that a little detail like this will block big business. Millions of cubic metres of last year's snowfall have been stored, ready for use in the games.

Thousands of artificial snow machines supplied by water from two new reservoirs will supplement the natural snowfall, if there is one.

Residents of the city are increasingly unhappy that resources can be found to make snow, while sewerage and electric light for ordinary residents are not seen as priorities.

The regime is petrified a terrorist act will take place. The North Caucasus is an ethnic and social cauldron. Unemployment in neighbouring areas can reach 50% while wages are less than €100 a month.

There are, on average, six to eight terrorist acts a month in the region, the latest being two deadly suicide bombings leaving 34 dead in Volgograd in December.

Sochi has been turned into a military camp. 100,000 police, troops, FSB agents and Cossacks have been mobilised to protect the city. Russian warships and two US warships are patrolling Sochi's Black Sea coast.

LGBT rights

Huge attention internationally is being addressed to how Putin is shoring up his authoritarian regime by resting on backward prejudices and attitudes.

A new repressive law has been passed supposedly banning pro-LGBT propaganda to minors, but in reality introducing severe restrictions on LGBT rights.

This has led to calls for campaigns in defence of LGBT rights during the Sochi games itself, including calls for a boycott.

The need for a campaign is clear as leading Russian figures including Putin continue to make homophobic comments, often equating LGBT rights with the misuse of children.

But while calls to boycott the Sochi Olympics are well meaning, the LGBT community in Russia can only be defended through an active and widespread campaign of propaganda and protests explaining why these attacks are taking place, and placing them in the context of the

massive corruption and attacks on workers' rights and environment that have been a central feature of the Sochi Olympics.

Ukraine: battling forces no friends of working class

Niall Mulholland, CWI

A violent stand-off between protesters and riot police continues in Kiev, with unrest spreading to other parts of Ukraine.

Crowds have stormed and occupied administrative buildings in Lviv, Lutskthe and elsewhere in the west of the country.

The protests have even spread to the east and south, which are traditionally Russian-speaking strongholds of President Viktor Yanukovich's Party of the Regions.

Alarmed by these developments, Yanukovich made new concessions to opposition political leaders on 28 January.

He sacked his hard-line prime minister, Mykola Azarov, and the government. The president also promised to repeal draconian legislation criminalising protest and freedom of speech.

With the Yanukovich regime edging towards the brink and pro-government demonstrations taking place in Donetsk, the Crimea and other parts of the west and south - raising the spectre of a slide towards wider civil conflict - influential oligarchs publicly intervened as 'brokers' last weekend.

Ukraine's richest man, Rinat Akmetov, released a statement on 27 January calling for an end to the "use of force" and for "peaceful action" to end the crisis.

Akmetov and Yanukovich's fortunes are closely linked, with Akmetov making his billions as Yanukovich rose to power (Akmetov's obscene wealth is also welcome in Cameron's Britain - where he owns a £136 million luxurious apartment at One Hyde Park).

But according to the Guardian, quoting a Ukrainian political analyst: "The oligarchs keep good relations with the opposition as an insurance policy".

Dutifully, the former world heavy-weight boxer turned opposition leader, Vitali Klitschko, welcomed Akmetov's statement.

It remains to be seen if Yanukovich can make enough concessions to satisfy the opposition leaders, the protesters and the oligarchs or if he will bring opposition figures into a new government.

Russia

Yanukovich also faces demands from the Russian government, which warned the Ukrainian president he faces a "creeping coup" unless he "quashed the rebellion".

Moscow also said it will hold off buying \$2 billion worth of Ukrainian government bonds until a new government is formed.

Klitschko and another opposition politician, Arseniy Yatseniuk - linked to the Fatherland Party of former prime minister Yulia Timoshenko (currently in jail) - both rejected joining a cabinet.

They said they would not abandon the protests until more demands were met. Opposition figures also rejected Yanukovich's offer of a conditional amnesty for jailed protesters, as it is dependent on the ending of government building occupations.

Among protesters on Independence Square, in central Kiev, the main demand is for Yanukovich's resignation and immediate elections.

This is a fate Yanukovich is likely to strongly resist, not least as he will fear a new regime would orchestrate his jailing, as he is accused of having done to Timoshenko.

At the same time, Yanukovich's concessions were sharply criticised within his own party. The president's subsequent temporary absence from office due to "illness" may well have been an attempt to gain tactical advantage among the intense competing pressures he faces.

Keen to push their advantage home, the opposition politicians, with the backing of the western powers, are demanding new elections and a new constitution.

Their aims are not in the interests of working people in Ukraine. They want to see the creation of a new pro-western regime that will defend the interests of the super-rich, including by enforcing austerity policies on the mass of Ukrainians.

EU

The protests began in November last year after Yanukovich rejected a free trade and political integration 'association agreement' with the European Union (EU), seen as a move to eventual Ukraine membership of the EU.

Ukraine was facing bankruptcy, lumbered with a \$15 billion debt. But the deal with the EU, with IMF backing, would have entailed carrying out deep austerity cuts.

Fearing an explosion of workers' protests, instead Yanukovich forged a new deal with the Putin regime in Russia. President Putin offered \$15 billion in loans and reduced energy prices.

Just like the western powers, the Putin regime is not acting in the interests of the working people of Ukraine.

While warning the EU to stay out of Ukraine's affairs, the Russian president also stated that he expected to see Ukraine make "structural changes " (meaning austerity cuts) to ensure the \$15 billion loan is paid back to Moscow.

Twice in the last ten years the Moscow regime cruelly cut off gas supplies to Ukraine to force favourable energy deals from its smaller neighbour.

The Yanukovich-Putin deal intensified the international power struggle for influence over Ukraine, which is an important geo-strategic territory.

Imperialist rivalries

Two major gas pipelines run from Russia through Ukraine to Europe and the country also hosts Russian naval bases.

Putin is now pushing for Ukraine to join a customs union it has made with Belarus and Kazakhstan, as a forerunner to a 'Eurasian Union'.

The Kremlin regards this as an important step to shoring up its regional position and to counter western imperialist influence.

The two months of mass protests saw many take to the streets of Kiev demanding an end to Yanukovich's authoritarian rule, endemic corruption, poverty and economic stagnation.

In the absence of an independent working class political leadership, many, especially in the west of Ukraine, desperately look towards EU membership as some sort of salvation.

This is despite the economic and social misery the policies of the EU and IMF have brought upon countries like Greece, Portugal and Spain.

The brutality of the riot police, particularly the notorious Berkut militia, the killing of at least five protesters in Kiev, the video footage of police torture and humiliation of detained protesters and the regime's planned anti-protest legislation, only inflamed wider sections of the population.

Far-right influence

At the same time, many in the more industrialised Russian-speaking east oppose the protests, fearing the arrival of EU competition would decimate their livelihoods.

Without an organised working class alternative, the street protests were from the start dominated by reactionary, pro-capitalist opposition figures, like Klitschko, with western backing.

The protests have also seen significant influence from the far right, including fascist groups. The anti-Semitic Svoboda party, fascistic White Hammer and the ultra-nationalist Right Sector were instrumental in orchestrating street rioting and the occupation of government buildings in Kiev and elsewhere.

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of an independent Ukraine, the working class of the country has paid heavily for its lack of political representation and independent organisations.

The restoration of capitalism saw the loss of 50% of Ukraine's national income in five years and the plummeting of workers' living standards, while a tiny minority looted state assets and became extremely enriched. Today a handful of oligarchs own the bulk of the Ukrainian economy.

The 'Orange Revolution' in 2004 saw an outpouring of mass anger at the authoritarian rule of Yanukovich and economic stagnation but the Kiev protest movement was safely kept along pro-Western capitalist lines.

Yanukovich was forced from power but there was no real improvement in living standards or democratic rights under the subsequent rule of Yushchenko and Timoshenko. The resulting mass disillusionment allowed Yanukovich to return as president.

All these politicians are discredited in the eyes of most workers and youth. The same will happen with Klitschko and the other reactionary opposition leaders.

Whatever the differences between the pro-EU opposition politicians and the Yanukovich regime, they are hostile to the interests of the working class.

The most important lesson for working people from recent events, whatever their ethnic background, is the need to find their genuine political voice.

A key task is to build independent unions and a mass united workers' party in opposition to the Yanukovich regime, the reactionary opposition forces and also their international capitalist backers.

This means a struggle for democratic rights and for fundamental social and economic change. It means taking the lead in the fight for jobs, a living wage, decent housing and a fully-funded welfare, health and education system.

It means the organised workers' movement being in the vanguard of the movement, using the methods of class struggle, democratically organised by workers' committees.

Socialist alternative

A powerful workers' movement could sweep away the far right and fascists from the streets and put forward a socialist alternative to those sections of society attracted by their poisonous ideas.

Such a movement could also make a class appeal to the rank and file of the police, neutralising the forces of the state.

Instead of the current Rada (parliament), which is stuffed full of reactionary, corrupt politicians in hoc to oligarchs, an organised workers' movement would demand the formation of a genuinely representative constituent assembly, and fight for a majority workers' government.

With socialist policies, a workers' government would expropriate the enormous wealth of the parasitic oligarchs and take the main sectors of the economy into public ownership, to be democratically planned by working people for working people.

Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition conference

Preparing the biggest left of Labour election challenge since the war

Suzanne Beishon, Waltham Forest Socialist Party

It felt fitting that on 1 February, the day Labour leader Ed Miliband unveiled his plans to sever the ties between Labour and the unions, over 200 trade unionists, community campaigners and socialists came together at the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition conference in London. This was preparation for the biggest left of Labour electoral challenge since World War Two.

Former Socialist Party councillor Dave Nellist, chairing the conference, laid out the ambitious plan to stand 625 candidates as 'anti-cuts beacons' for working class people in the May 2014 elections. This scale is necessary to attempt to break the media blackout of anything beyond the parties of capitalism. The hall was buzzing when it was revealed that already 400 people have been identified as potential candidates with two months of the nomination period left.

Trade union speakers

The morning session began with speeches from leading representatives of the trade unions that have already broken with or are not affiliated to Labour. The speakers made it clear they are working to seriously build a political alternative for their members and the working class as a whole.

Mike Sargent, from the RMT executive council, outlined the battle his union faces to defend jobs, safety and the service on the London Underground. He attacked the 'keep calm and carry on' culture pushed by the media and argued we need to do the opposite - we need to get angry, get organised and fight back, not just industrially but also on the political front.

Joe Simpson, assistant general secretary of the POA prison workers' union, responded to the news of Miliband's proposals to break the union link, calling on him to "stop talking, do it and sod off so we can build a new workers' party".

John McNally, PCS vice-president, questioned what the trade unions get from their support for pro-big business Labour. He also said that "those who sneer at TUSC are prepared to tell us what's wrong and why, but not what to do about it other than to vote Labour. That's not a policy, that's an abdication of responsibility."

Discontent in the affiliated unions with the Labour link was reflected in the contributions from the floor. Dave Walsh from Liverpool reported on the overwhelming vote in Unite's United Left in the North West to break the Labour link. Unison branch secretary Glenn Kelly

explained (in a personal capacity) that two-thirds of Unison members who pay into the political fund refuse to give money to Labour - but the leadership won't allow debate on it.

'No cuts' candidates

TUSC national election agent Clive Heemskerk introduced the afternoon's discussion on the May election campaign. He pointed out that the distinguishing feature of candidates who stand for TUSC is that they pledge to oppose all cuts, to vote for no-cuts budgets and that they assert that councils have powers to resist making cuts.

He challenged the idea that there is nothing Labour councils can do to fight the cuts locally, pointing to the "many, many, many loopholes that councillors could find if they were determined to beat the cuts", as has been the case with the bedroom tax.

Later, referring to the enormous gains won for the working class in Liverpool in the 1980s when he was a leader of the city council, Tony Mulhearn explained that if the political will is there, you can drive a coach and horses through 'legal technicalities' - if you have the support of a mass movement.

Alongside Clive on the platform was Keith Morrell, Southampton rebel councillor. He gave an inspiring look at how socialist councillors can be effective defenders of their communities. He highlighted the fear in the Labour Party of him and fellow rebel councillor Don Thomas getting re-elected: "The Labour Party are mounting a huge campaign against us. They don't want us to win because it will prove if you stand up and fight, you will get a response".

The election victory of Kshama Sawant in Seattle and the progress of the Workers And Socialist Party in South Africa were pointed to throughout the day as examples of where the working class will look for and build political alternatives.

Nancy Taaffe and Sarah Wrack commented on the practical examples we can take from the campaign in the US, raising the positive campaign for rent controls that has been launched in Waltham Forest in London and the 'pink roadside flashmobs' inspired by Seattle that they are using to "break the visual blockade" on TUSC.

Unity and optimism

Oktay Sahbaz from Day-Mer and others showed how the TUSC campaign was being taken up by the Turkish and Kurdish communities of North London and raised the importance of unity with migrant communities and workforces in fighting the cuts. He sent a "we are coming for you!" warning to the councillors where they will be standing.

Joe Robinson, a TUSC town councillor elected last March in Maltby, spoke on 'how to win'. He linked today's struggles with the anniversary of the miners' strike and pointed out that while Maltby "may just be a parish council it was still an election fought on an anti-austerity platform".

Contributions from the Mayor of Harrow (expelled from the Labour Party for opposing library closures), Chris Flood, a former socialist councillor in Lewisham, and many more, added to the optimistic and practical discussion on the potential for a left of Labour challenge in May.

In his remarks, the POA's Joe Simpson summed up the determined mood that was evident throughout the conference when he ended his contribution with: "Is TUSC the answer? I don't know, but I'll try hard to make it the answer and the political voice for every worker in this country".

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Socialist Students conference:

Preparing for the struggles to come

Claire Laker-Mansfield, Socialist Students national organiser

On 1-2 February Socialist Students met for a national conference, with 61 people from 25 universities and colleges in attendance.

This meeting couldn't have come at a more crucial time for the student movement. We are currently witnessing an intensification of attacks on education.

The privatisation of the student loan company is underway, with the potential for huge interest hikes and the removal of the (already limited) protections afforded to borrowers.

Meanwhile cuts and privatisation on campuses continue apace. The government's last spending review saw £45 million taken from higher education and £260 million from further education.

Workers who staff our colleges and universities are facing an unrelenting onslaught. Strikes organised by the University and College Union (UCU), Unison and Unite, have brought education workers out together to demand fair pay, following years of declining wages and a further proposed cut.

Attempts to oppose these brutal attacks on education through peaceful protest have faced violent repression at the hands of the police, often with the active collusion and collaboration of university managements.

In the week running up to the conference, 14 students were arrested at Birmingham University. This followed a peaceful demonstration and a four-hour long police 'kettle' in the freezing cold.

Outrageously, the university has since moved to suspend all Birmingham students who were arrested.

The right to protest

This disgraceful undermining of the right to protest on campus has by no means been isolated to one university.

At the end of last year an eruption of anger took place with big demonstrations organised under the slogan 'cops off campus'.

This followed police violence at the University of London where students were forcefully evicted from an occupation over student democracy, fair pay for staff and the privatisation of student loans.

It was in this context that Socialist Students met to discuss the role that socialists can play in universities and colleges.

We looked at the state of the student movement today, attempted to draw lessons from historic struggles and discussed a way forward for Socialist Students and our activity over the next months.

First and foremost, we seek to offer a direction in the struggle to defend education on campuses. The Socialist Students conference launched a campaign to 'stop the student debt spiral', which will begin with participation in a week of action (3-7 February) and particular emphasis on organising events on Thursday 6 February.

We aim for this to be part of building a campaign, organised on campuses across the country and linked together nationally.

In addition, there were discussions on a whole number of issues which Socialist Students can take a lead in campaigning on, including student housing, fighting sexism and supporting Tamil Solidarity.

The conference also discussed the need for the National Union of Students (NUS), currently dominated by right-wing Labour Students, to adopt a fighting strategy.

We agreed motions that we plan to take to NUS conference and to stand candidates in the elections.

But we pointed out that it would not be correct to wait for a lead to descend from on high in NUS. Instead we must begin building campaigns on the ground (with or without 'official' backing) while simultaneously pushing NUS to use their resources to support and organise a struggle to defend education.

As well as helping to organise and lead struggle, it is also crucially important for Socialist Students to help popularise and build support for socialist ideas among a new generation.

Clearly among broad layers of students there is currently a thirst for ideas and a search for an alternative to crisis-ridden capitalism.

Members reported on some excellent meetings and debates that have been hosted by Socialist Students. Topics like 'Was Russell Brand right about revolution?', 'Socialism - an idea to change the world' and 'the revolutionary ideas of Leon Trotsky' have drawn big crowds in many areas. This work must be continued.

Many left the conference reporting that they felt re-invigorated for the tasks and struggles that are to come, and inspired by hearing about the good work that Socialist Students groups are involved in around the country.

As attacks on education intensify, it's more vital than ever that we build strong socialist organisations on campuses, capable of leading the fightback among students, and winning a new generation to the ideas of Marxism and the struggle to change the world.

Cameron's cruel cuts hammer the homeless of Oxfordshire

Reflecting the two sides of austerity the relatively rich Tory county of Oxfordshire has proposed to cut Housing Related Support by 38%. Over 300 campaigners turned out to lobby Tory county councillors last Tuesday to voice their anger and call for the proposals to be withdrawn.

Despite the wealth of the county, over 350 people are currently receiving support to get housed. A further 550 receive support to prevent them becoming homeless. Oxford city is reported as being the second highest city outside London for the number of rough sleepers and this is rising.

Speakers at the lobby outlined how the problem is worsening. Campaigner for Oxford Homeless Services, Lucy Dewhurst, said: "Services have been cut by 20% over the last two years, the 'fat' has been trimmed, they are now cutting to the bone and beyond".

Connexions workers explained that homelessness has increased by 20% in the South East in the last year, with far fewer places in the rented sector and the impact of cuts to welfare benefits. These cuts save nothing, by pushing the problems onto other services, eg with homeless people using A&E services five times more than the average.

Invaluable help

One service user and Socialist Party member, Emil Boughton, explained what it is like for people: "Without these services I would be homeless now. The government paints a picture of worthless scroungers but this is not how it is. I faced a crisis due to losing my job and the massive pressure it put on my life, my young son and my health. In a short time everything I had was destroyed. I nearly lost my home due to the Bedroom Tax. If it wasn't for the Rosehill Advice Centre and the support I received I don't know what I would have done. They helped me with an emergency grant and food. Sometimes I can't pay for my utilities and the gas is cut off. I'm really angry, what we need is jobs that pay a decent wage".

Many young students joined the rally who volunteer in some of the hostels in Oxford and were angry at the attack on vulnerable people. Others supporting the campaign included Green and Labour councillors. Despite their opposition to the cuts they provided no solutions other than increasing the Council Tax and putting the cost on heavily squeezed pockets of local workers and their families rather than taxing the super rich who caused this crisis.

If the cuts go through, one hostel in Oxford will be threatened with closure. An occupation should be prepared and built for if any hostels face closure. Pressure must be put on the Labour council in Oxford to maintain these services.

This can only be done by the council refusing to implement the Con-Dem cuts, as £11.7 million has been cut from the budget, and demanding the government restore funding. If Labour refuses to take such a stand, Oxford TUSC candidates will take the issues of cuts and housing to the electors in May.

Oxford Socialist Party members

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Somerset residents need fully-funded environmental planning

Jim Thomson

Residents in Somerset still find their homes underwater four weeks after the initial floods. Villages on the Somerset Levels have been most affected, and while communities expect some flooding in these areas, the effect of government cuts and climate change have meant these "once in a hundred years events" are happening every year.

This week Owen Patterson, the Tory environment secretary, visited Somerset to witness the damage himself. He left without speaking to any residents and has also made misleading statements, saying that the Coalition has spent more money on flood prevention than the previous Labour government. This is untrue.

The reason why this year's flooding has been so severe is because the river Parrett, where the flood water is supposed to drain into, has not been dredged. This is obviously due to the huge cuts to the Environment Agency - reportedly up to 40%. What makes this worse is that these dangers were already highlighted in a previous flooding plan written last year. The Con-Dem coalition has ignored this, and the wider concern about flooding, in favour of their austerity agenda. This is madness when put in the context of climate change.

Somerset residents don't need vacuous statements from visiting ministers. We need fully-funded environmental planning, which can try to mitigate the problems of climate change, not exacerbate them. However, all the three main parties support cuts; to the Environment Agency as well as the NHS, education and councils. We need a new party that not only provides funding for environmental planning, but also uses a socialist plan of production to dramatically reduce carbon dioxide emissions and pollution in order to reduce climate change.

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Stop £98 million cuts in Worcestershire

Worcestershire county council will meet on Thursday 13 February to discuss plans for a further £98 million of cuts to public services including the possible withdrawal of all funding for bus services.

These plans have met with opposition including meetings in several villages where the bus service could be reduced and put in the hands of private profiteers.

In some cases school buses are threatened despite 25% of pupils needing to use the bus. The council consultation document even says that government money could be available to help private operators "grow" their business. Why can't this money be used to fund our current services?

Worcestershire County branch of Unison has called a protest at 12 noon and has the support of Worcester Trades Union Council and Worcester TUSC activists. We aim to make some noise and let the councillors have an earful.

Pete McNally, Worcester Socialist Party

Fleetwood: MP tries to evade hospital campaigners

A petition of 1,600 signatures calling for Fleetwood hospital to remain open was handed to Tory MP Eric Ollerenshaw on Friday at the North Euston Hotel in Fleetwood. This was in spite of the MP's office ringing me before the meeting to tell me the venue had changed. It was only by going back to the Euston after the deadline that we met the MP!

On 13 March 2012 Eric Ollerenshaw MP 'sold' Fleetwood hospital when he voted for the health Act designed to privatise and run down hospital care, so any excuse can only be paramount to crocodile tears.

The fact that the venue was changed so close to the time of the meeting, which turned out to be wrong, can only be seen as a deliberate attempt to duck and dive the issue, much to the disgust of those people who turned up and had to go home again! Despite Eric Ollerenshaw's apologies, this sort of tactic is unacceptable, but expected, and did not stop us presenting the petition.

People are angry at the closure of Rossall hospital and the broken promises to the town, and now people are upset and angry that treatment they got at Fleetwood hospital has been taken away. The cost of getting to Blackpool for basic treatment has affected a lot of disabled people as we are constantly reminded of on our weekly street stall. Only TUSC election candidates are willing to fight and oppose these evil cuts brought about because of fat-cat greed and squandering of taxpayers' money.

Ray Smith

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Building the Socialist Party

Llanelli

The 2 February Socialist Party paper sale and stall in Llanelli town centre supported Unison Carmarthenshire branch's campaign against cuts in services and jobs proposed by the council and the campaign to save St Paul's old people's home.

There will be a lobby of the Labour-led Carmarthenshire council at the County Hall, 8.30am on 12 February.

Les Woodward

Coventry

Coventry Socialist Party members hit the streets once again on Saturday, campaigning for the third week running for an increase in the minimum wage to £10.

Initially the demand for £10 raises the odd eyebrow among some people who think it may be too high. However, once we've started talking about the mega profits being made by the big corporations, the MPs giving themselves an 11% pay rise and that the 85 richest people in the world have the same wealth as the 3.5 billion poorest, people often say perhaps it should be higher!

Among chats about the minimum wage we still get passers-by bringing up the fact that Socialist Party member Dave Nellist only took a worker's wage when he was a MP.

Paul Gibbons

National Congress

The Socialist Party's 2014 national congress will take place on 8-10 March. Congress is the main decision-making body of the Socialist Party.

Every branch should plan discussions on the congress documents and set aside time to elect the delegates.

The documents on British Perspectives, party building, sales of the Socialist and finance have now been sent out to branches.

21 February is the deadline for branch resolutions, booking crèche places, and getting delegates names and £10 deposits to the national centre.

28 February is the deadline for branch amendments and visitors' names.

We appeal to all Socialist Party members and readers of the Socialist to help support delegates' and visitors' attendance costs, as well as support the Congress fighting fund collection. Contact your local Socialist Party branch organisers or phone 020 8988 8777.

Stop the tube cuts: Support the strikes!

Neil Cafferky

As we go to press the RMT and TSSA unions on the London Underground (LU) are preparing for two rounds of 48-hour strike action on 4 and 11 February.

All trade unionists in London and across the country must support this fight against an intransigent employer.

Meaningful talks at Acas proved impossible because LU refused to withdraw from implementing their cuts plan.

The unions were left with no choice but to fight to defend jobs, services and safety on London's transport network.

The response from the Tories and the right-wing media has been predictable. David Cameron blames RMT leader Bob Crow saying: "Bob Crow's strike is plain wrong and Bob Crow should call it off rather than inflict misery on hard-working families in London".

This is not 'Bob Crow's strike'. This is a strike that has been called by the workers on London Underground to stop almost 1,000 job cuts and the closure of all underground ticket offices.

The leaders of the RMT and TSSA need the agreement of their members to call strike action.

Did David Cameron or his underling in London Boris Johnson, consult with the workers or the travelling public about cutting jobs and closing a vital public service? Not a bit of it! In fact when Boris Johnson was seeking election in 2008 he promised to keep ticket offices open and blamed strikes on... ticket office closures!

"London Underground's insistence on closing ticket offices, against the wishes of staff and local people, has caused this dispute. This is why I have proposed to halt the ticket office closures..."

The truth is that it's Cameron, Johnson and their fellow Etonians in government who have been inflicting misery on hard working families for three years.

Up and down the country we have seen working class people fighting back against Con-Dem policies - hospital cuts, job losses, attacks on benefits and the destruction of public services.

The strikes by the RMT and TSSA unions on the Underground are part of that same fightback. These workers have the ability to inflict a real defeat on Cameron and Co.

A victory for the workers on London Underground will be a victory for everyone who has borne the brunt of the Tories' austerity policies for the last three years.

Support them!

- No job cuts, no ticket office closures, no to increased risk to passengers' and workers' safety.
- Open the books - let workers and passengers see where the government grant and fare revenues are spent.
- Restore the subsidy - London Underground receives a small government subsidy by international comparison.
- In 2012 LU covered 91% of its operating budget with fare revenue - compared to 56% for the New York Subway (2009) and 40% for the Paris Metro (2007).
- No privatisation - all outsourcing should stop and all services be brought back in-house, including cleaning and maintenance.
- LU took on massive debts as a result of the mistaken privatisation of the tube's infrastructure. While LU aims to save £220 million by cutting jobs, pay and conditions on its stations, they happily wasted £500 million on consultants, who all said privatisation would work.
- Cut fares - build a cheap, efficient service - the RMT has exposed the fact that London Underground charges double the fare per kilometre travelled than the next most expensive by international comparison (Tokyo) and more than double the fare charged in New York.

Public and Commercial Services Union

Re-elect the fighting, campaigning leadership

The elections for the leadership of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) will start soon. Nominations will close on 6 March.

The election will run through April and closes on 8 May. Socialist Party members who are standing include Chris Baugh for assistant general secretary (AGS), Janice Godrich for president and John McNally for vice-president.

A full list is available on leftunity.org.uk

The Socialist interviewed assistant general secretary Chris Baugh about the election.

What difference do you think the left leadership has made to PCS?

The current leadership, of which I'm part, working with Mark Serwotka as general secretary and Janice Godrich as president, has built the union into a force prepared to speak and act on behalf of members.

We have been campaigning in defence of members' interests since 2004, when Tony Blair and Gordon Brown declared that 100,000 civil servants were surplus to requirements.

As a result of the leadership given in the union and the action taken by PCS members, we secured important protection in the form of a jobs protocol that has prevented compulsory redundancies.

The PCS leadership has played a pivotal role in organising PCS members and mobilising across public sector trade unions - like the action on pensions on 30 June 2011 and of course the massive public sector strike that we saw on 30 November the same year.

The activist culture that PCS promotes, the leadership we give and the work we do to organise opposition to the austerity programme, means that we are now targeted by the government, particularly Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude.

In the 1980s people used to claim that Margaret Thatcher attacked the trade unions because she was unpleasant.

That might be so, but the major reason she attacked the unions and the reason why Francis Maude is targeting PCS now is because we are an obstacle to the employer and government's plans to attack our members' pay, jobs and conditions.

It reinforces the need for trade unions in the civil service and a vibrant form of trade unionism that reaches out to the young and the unorganised.

The emergence of a right-wing candidate for AGS makes it even more important for branches to nominate me for AGS and the full Democracy Alliance slate for the president, vice-presidents and the national executive.

What do you think are the main issues facing PCS at the moment?

We are faced with the biggest attack on the pay, jobs and conditions of PCS members in living memory.

And an attack on trade union rights in the form of a cut in facility time. Increasing numbers of our reps are being victimised and targeted by the employer. Now there is a threat to the check-off method of collecting union subscriptions.

Our members have suffered a 14% cut in living standards on average. There is now a threat to progression within pay grades. Increasing numbers of members are struggling to make ends meet.

PCS needs to reach out across the wider trade union movement against the pay freeze. A pay rise for public sector workers is not just beneficial to our members but can encourage other workers to fight low pay.

We have continued to argue that the most effective way of standing up to austerity is a common response - not by the public sector alone but the wider trade union movement.

PCS will continue to enforce the terms of a jobs protocol that avoids compulsory redundancy. We will continue to call for proper staffing levels and to challenge the cuts that are being inflicted across every department agency and public body.

It should never be forgotten that all of our terms and conditions including flexible working hours, maternity and paternity leave and sick pay were not gifted. They were won and will be defended through union activity.

PCS needs a leadership which continues to support the membership at group level and demands central negotiations and a national framework agreement.

We need a leadership that is prepared to mobilise against the growing threat of privatisation. We argue that in the interests of our members and the wider public that the delivery of these services is best achieved through the public sector.

PCS has defeated proposals by Siemens and in Hewlett Packard to offshore jobs and our members' work. The current dispute taking place around Shared Services is about defending union rights, defending our members' pay, terms and conditions and also defeating the proposals to offshore 50% of the work.

The 30 November strike was a high point in coordinated action against austerity. Do you think we can take that approach further against the background of continuing attacks?

The decision of certain unions to step back from that dispute after 30 November was a terrible tactical mistake.

The consequence, far from producing a respite, is that the government has become even more emboldened.

We need to rebuild both the momentum and the broad opposition to austerity, reflected in a sustained public campaign including industrial action.

But this must also reach out to all those fighting austerity, including local anti-cuts groups, pensioners, students, etc.

It is essential that the trade union movement leads from the front and uses that latent power to organise a coordinated, mass, sustained fightback.

There is a view that we should just keep our heads down and wait for a Miliband-led Labour government - what's your reaction to that?

It would be a mistake to simply await the outcome of the next general election. It is essential that we continue to organise in defence of quality public services.

Shadow chancellor Ed Balls has shown that a future Labour government would effectively live within many of the spending plans set out by Osborne.

The trade union movement needs to continue to use its industrial power to provide the maximum protection for its members.

But it also raises questions of political representation. The Labour Party has long abandoned the interests of working class people and it is absolutely essential that PCS works with others to support candidates who are prepared to fight for the interests of PCS members and working people generally.

I'm pleased to say that, after an extensive consultation exercise, PCS members have already voted in favour of the union doing this.

- For more see: chrisbaughpcs.blogspot.co.uk

Joint action is the way forward for the unions

John Mcinally, PCS national vice-president, recently wrote (in a personal capacity) in the Socialist Party's magazine Socialism Today about why PCS believes joint coordinated industrial action is still the way forward. This is a short extract:

"In this period of austerity when we are under relentless attack, our movement must get back to fundamentals.

"The job of a union is not to negotiate cuts in pay and conditions but to fight to defend and improve what we have.

"That is why the whole movement must oppose and organise to defeat the destruction of the welfare state and the NHS.

Strike action is our main weapon so we need to develop the strategy and tactics to ensure we use it effectively in our collective interest. That is why PCS is now posing the question straight - we are in favour of joint coordinated industrial action to defeat the cuts - will you join us?"

For more see: www.socialismtoday.org

NUT national executive agrees date for national strike action

Martin Powell-Davies, Member of the NUT national executive

The NUT national executive has agreed the next steps in our campaign on pay, pensions and conditions.

I'm pleased to report that, among other suggestions, a number of the proposals that I and others around the Local Associations National Action Committee (Lanac) have been making over the last weeks and months were taken on board - such as exploring support for a national demonstration for education and, above all, agreement on a date for national strike action to take place before Easter, whether or not other unions agree to coordinate with us.

Regrettably, as these decisions weren't decided on at the previous special meeting of the NEC, a strike can't now be built for in time for the original announced deadline of 13 February - which would also have allowed more time for further strike action to be put in place before Easter.

The executive agreed that a formal announcement of the strike date will be made by 7 February, so let's start building for the action that will follow.

NUT members will be relieved that their union is taking national action to defend teachers and education.

However, they will also be thinking about what has to come next if we are to defeat Gove's attacks. Those discussions about the ongoing strategy to win this dispute are essential - and will be central to debates at NUT annual conference this Easter.

Lanac's Campaign Conference on 1 February debated that strategy, based on our policy of arguing for a calendar of ongoing national action, including consideration of escalation to a two-day strike and collections for hardship funds to allow maximum participation in strike action.

It also overwhelmingly agreed to back my stand in this summer's election for NUT general secretary. With that backing - and indications of support from other NUT Associations not able to attend the meeting, my branch, Lewisham NUT has now formally written to NUT Associations seeking my nomination to stand in the election.

Two nominations - in Tower Hamlets and Greenwich - have already been confirmed.

If we are to stop Gove, we have to organise:

- An ongoing calendar of national action - not just isolated strike days
- Collections for hardship funds so all can strike
- Escalation from one to two-day action - warning Gove that more could follow

- A national work-to-rule to resist any attempt to worsen conditions
- A public campaign to defend education with leaflets, meetings, a national demonstration
- YES we need to fight for professional unity but we can't afford to wait if others won't act
- Meet with NASUWT colleagues and urge they demand a return to joint action alongside the NUT
- Let's coordinate strikes with other trade unions too

See Martin's blog: electmartin1.blogspot.com

Yorks ambulance workers strike again

Iain Dalton

On 1 February, Unite members in the Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust took part in a further 24-hour strike as part of their long-running dispute.

Unite members outside the Wakefield depot remained determined in their fight to force the Trust to re-recognise the union and stop the savage cuts which are currently taking place.

Meanwhile, more Unison members, frustrated at the union's continued inaction in opposing the cuts, the latest being attacks on lunch breaks, are going over to Unite.

Terry Cunliffe, Unite regional officer, spoke to the Socialist:

"My understanding of Unison's position is that for the last 12 months they have regionally supported Unite's campaign for re-recognition.

"I have to say the local branch are not following that mandate and in fact have spoken openly, hostilely about the re-recognition of Unite.

"They don't support us in the way that they promised at the TUC, the local branch activists are actively against our re-recognition.

"Unison have gone round the stations supporting the management plan, they have balloted their members and I have heard them, speaking about their ballot result. 70% of their members don't agree with their branch position, rejecting the management proposal.

"As far as I am concerned, this completely vindicates the decision that we made to campaign and fight against these cuts.

"They are dangerous to patients and dangerous to our members, and Unison members feel the same. I'm hoping the Unison branch takes that mandate and joins the fight against these cuts."

A further four-hour strike is taking place on 3 February to mark a year since the union was de-recognised by the former Trust chief executive.

Preparing action in Lewisham

Unite members employed by Lewisham council in the Attendance and Welfare Service are preparing for strike action.

The south London council is planning to cut the service by an additional £300,000, having already cut it by £200,000. The staffing will be reduced from 22 to 12.

The frontline service works hard to battle school truancy - and it has done so successfully. The impact of the cut will be drastic.

Early intervention, acknowledged by professionals as the best method of dealing with truancy, will disappear. Instead, there will be an overwhelming reliance on prosecution.

The council is proposing that schools buy the service in from existing budgets. It plans to make the staffing reductions and have its model in place before any schools have expressed an interest.

In consultation meetings, the employer has admitted that schools are "uncertain", "still at the thinking stage", "not committing themselves" and that most worryingly there is no assumption that there would be a lot of buy-in from schools.

The end result will be a disaster for truancy levels across the borough, with a real impact on young people and the resultant social problems that follow.

Unite members in the service have now voted to be balloted for strike action. Over the next few days, Unite will be issuing the council with the required legal notice of a strike ballot.

The union is confident, following consultation with members, that there will be a large majority for strike action.

Royal Opera House workers win living wage

Victory over poverty pay

"This is a tremendous victory for the IWGB workers and it sends out a message to all low pay employers that we are not willing to tolerate poverty pay and we're coming for you". John McDonnell MP

MITIE has confirmed in writing that it has accepted the proposals of the IWGB on the London Living Wage for porters and cleaners at the Royal Opera House.

From 1st February 2014 a pay rate of £8.00 an hour will apply and from 1st April 2014 a pay rate of £8.80 an hour will apply.

The case for the Living Wage was clear and affordable, costing a mere 0.15% of ROH income. As such IWGB rejected any so-called "efficiency savings" to pay for the increase. The ballot for strike action which saw a 100% yes vote proved a commitment to fight for justice.

The IWGB members have won tremendous respect in this campaign. Ken Loach the award winning film producer called for solidarity with the strike and 25 MPs signed a motion in the House of Commons to support the workers.

Other unions including the Musicians Union and actors' union Equity, along with RMT, PCS, BFWU, and the National Shop Stewards Network supported the campaign. IWGB members on strike at the University of London came to demonstrate their support on the day of their own strike. There were solidarity protests prepared in Glasgow, New York and Los Angeles.

Divide and rule failed!

The attempt to play one union off against another failed. The vast majority of cleaners and porters are IWGB members. MITIE's recognition of another union on 13th January showed an arrogant disregard for the workers' opinions. How worthless this agreement is was shown by the fact that the IWGB strike was going ahead regardless. Only an agreement with IWGB could end the dispute.

MITIE ignored offers from the IWGB to use ACAS to achieve a constructive recognition agreement. The IWGB is committed to secure recognition and will take strike action if necessary to win it.

From a Briefing of the Independent Workers Union (IWGB)

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 3 February 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Future Directions dispute settled

The long-running dispute by care workers at Future Directions in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, has ended in a settlement involving significant concessions from the employer, which their union Unison sees as a victory. Future Directions (FD) is a private company wholly owned by Lancashire-based Calderstones NHS trust.

When FD was awarded the contract by Rochdale council to provide care for seriously disabled adults in the borough, it imposed massive pay cuts on staff of up to 40% plus various other attacks on terms and conditions.

Unison members responded with 29 days strike action over the course of nearly 12 months as they resisted this enormous attack. Now, Rochdale council is putting more money into all services caring for complex needs. At FD, this means members will receive a pay rise from their current levels of pay, which will see them significantly better paid than staff working for other care companies in Rochdale.

Unison is now looking to unionise and re-organise across FD as part of a drive to unionise private sector care staff. And FD management have learned that they have to deal with Unison, or face serious and sustained strike action by workers determined to defend their terms and conditions and the service that they provide.

Hugh Caffrey

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 31 January 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in *The Socialist*.

Tebay: RMT rally

The Lancs and District RMT branch is holding a commemorative rally on Saturday 15 February, ten years after the Tebay rail disaster.

In 2004 four rail workers were killed and five were injured by a runaway rail wagon which hit them when they were working on a track at night.

The RMT has been campaigning ever since for safety measures to be improved for track workers, but the battle still continues.

The rally starts at 12 noon, a quarter of a mile south of Tebay, where the A685 crosses the railway line. Tebay is off junction 38 of the M6.

Who supported the 1984-85 miners' strike?

Tony Mulhearn, Liverpool 47 councillor 1983-87

Demanding a government apology for Thatcher's ruthless attack on the miners sounds hollow coming from Labour MPs.

Labour's leader then, Neil (now Lord) Kinnock, did absolutely nothing to assist the miners in their titanic 1984/85 struggle to defend their jobs and communities.

The state's role in deploying the forces of repression against Arthur Scargill of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the miners is well-documented.

New generations of working class activists need to recall the measures used by a hostile Thatcher government to crush the miners.

But the Labour leadership's baleful role, bending the knee to big capital, cannot be forgotten.

Infiltration

There was illegal deployment of a national police formation like an army of occupation in the mining communities.

There was the use of spies from different state agencies to infiltrate the NUM at the highest level; the planting of false evidence against Scargill, eg the phoney 'witnesses' describing how Scargill and others allegedly shared out money received for the miners.

There was police fabrication of false evidence and the forging of reports charging innocent miners with criminal intent.

This activity went to the very top of a rotten anti-working class state machine, directly controlled by Thatcher and her acolytes, one of whom, Lord Tebbit, still condemns the miners.

He uses the absence of a ballot to justify the most appalling brutality since the army shot down unarmed miners in Tonyandy in 1913.

Calling for an apology can be justified. But apologies should also be sought from Kinnock and his fellow right wingers.

They shared the approach of electricians' union general secretary Eric Hammond, who became the first trade union leader to serve with the inner councils of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

Hammond also invited Tebbit, principal architect of Thatcher's anti-union legislation, to the union's training centre as a distinguished guest and organised scab labour to run Rupert Murdoch's presses at Wapping.

At the 1985 Labour Party conference Kinnock spoke in the debate on a resolution calling for amnesty for miners convicted during the strike.

He launched a vicious attack on the NUM leadership, supported by Hammond who described the NUM leadership as donkeys.

Tony Benn's diaries show that not one trade union leader who supported the miners was called into the debate.

Eventually under pressure the chair called in Ron Todd from TGWU (now Unite). His speech giving full support to the miners implied that Hammond was akin to a jackal. Miners and their families in the gallery were reportedly weeping.

Solidarity

At the same conference Kinnock launched his pernicious 'grotesque chaos' speech against the Liverpool 47.

However, unlike his Lordship, Liverpool city council had a proud record of supporting the miners. The 47 councillors went on miners' picket lines across the North West and set aside a portion of the rates to assist miners' families experiencing real hardship.

Miners' collecting facilities were made available throughout the city and several major fund-raising events were organised, raising tens of thousands of pounds.

Council leaders spoke at mass rallies with Arthur Scargill and other miners' leaders, pledging our full and unconditional support.

An estimated £1 million was raised in Liverpool for the miners. As a token of their appreciation Lancashire miners presented a specially created brass miner's lamp to the Liverpool 47.

Apologies will never rectify the damage perpetrated by a crazed prime minister and a thuggish union-buster called Ian McGregor, imported from the USA to break the car and steel unions, then the NUM.

But the lessons of both a treacherous Labour leadership, and of a Tory government prepared to use any methods to break the working class, should never be forgotten.

Out soon

A civil war without guns

by **Ken Smith**

The Socialist Party's history of the 1984-85 miners' strike, *A Civil War Without Guns*, by Ken Smith, is being reprinted with a new introduction in time for the 30th anniversary of this colossal struggle. Watch this space for more details.

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Pete Seeger - Sound of US protest movement

Roger Bannister

The death of American folk singer Pete Seeger will be keenly felt by those who lived through the social and political convulsions of the 1960s.

This was the era of the American civil rights movement, the international campaign against the Vietnam War, and the general feeling of youth rebellion evident everywhere.

Pete Seeger developed as a musician and political activist from his teenage years. He discovered authentic American folk music by riding freight cars with unemployed hobos and meeting ordinary people, poor farmers, workers, particularly those in struggle.

Seeger began writing songs about the conditions these people faced. Increasingly they were more political songs, not least when he campaigned for the Republican forces against Franco's fascists in the Spanish Civil War.

He played guitar, 12-stringed guitar and famously five-stringed banjo. He formed a folk group called the Weavers, to honour a group of Silesian weavers who rebelled against oppression in the 19th century.

All the Weavers' members were blacklisted during the 1950s McCarthy witch hunt in the US.

Pete Seeger had joined the Young Communist League in 1936, later joining the Communist Party of America.

His politics and many of his songs brought him before McCarthy's Un-American Activities Committee. Unlike many, he refused to take the Fifth Amendment, (a protection in US law against self-incrimination), but refused to justify his beliefs and activities, or to incriminate any associates.

This resulted in a prison sentence, which was quashed on appeal though Seeger was blacklisted by broadcasting and recording companies.

Refusing to be silenced he took his music to college campuses, labour halls, small country towns where he performed to small farmers and rural poor.

He later said: "I still call myself a communist because communism is no more what Russia made of it than Christianity is what the churches made of it".

This period coincided with the US folk music revival. Artists like Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel and Tom Paxton all paid tribute to Pete Seeger's influence on their own musical development.

The folk music revival coincided with protest movements that developed in the 1960s. Many artists sang songs of protest but Seeger was seen as the father of them all.

Adapting an old spiritual, he produced the anthem of 60s protest, We Shall Overcome. Where Have All the Flowers Gone?, If I Had a Hammer and Turn Turn Turn are also widely known.

In later years his political campaigning focussed on environmental issues. His willingness to share his talents, stand up for the oppressed and stick by his principles to the point of sacrifice will endear Pete Seeger's memory to socialists.

As Osborne claims recovery...

...Super-exploitation is the reality

Youth Fight for Jobs member

In October last year I began my apprenticeship as a spray painter. This has not offered a route out of poverty. With an hourly wage of £3.52 an hour, it has just been a route to super-exploitation.

At the age of 20, I want to move out of my family home and get a place of my own, but with a tiny income and entitled to no benefits, this is near impossible.

Young apprentices are seen as a good source of cheap labour that can be easily replaced if we step out of line and start to demand better pay, working conditions and an end to bullying from management.

Many friends of mine have started work in the construction industry, only to be sacked within a year.

I work in a factory alongside skilled joiners and sprayers. Around half of the workforce lost their job after the onset of the economic crisis.

Double pay for overtime was slashed to time and a half. Even the Christmas night out was something that the bosses wouldn't cough up money for.

Unionisation

With 50 hour weeks common, some of the joiners joke that they may as well build themselves a bed as it feels as if they barely leave the factory! This is a complete scandal when thousands of joiners and construction workers are unable to find lasting employment.

On my first day I approached the shop steward to ask for a union registration form and quickly joined the GMB.

I am known among the apprentices at my tech college for being an active socialist. Some have come to me recently asking me to sign them up to a trade union as they want protection at work.

The unionisation of apprentices is important and I will continue to encourage it. Some argue that unions aren't for apprentices, but as one of the lowest paid and most precarious sections of the working class we urgently need to organise to protect our interests as much as any other worker has to.

The scandal of sub-minimum wage pay for apprentices must be taken up by socialists and trade unionists.

The campaign led by Socialist Alternative (co-thinkers of the Socialist Party) in the US for a \$15 dollar an hour minimum wage has struck a chord with many workers struggling to make ends meet.

A campaign in Britain for a £10 an hour minimum wage, the ending of the pay freeze and a maximum working week of 35 hours without loss of pay, would resonate with the working class the length and breadth of Britain.

We must also continue to campaign for a programme of public works to end the scandal of youth unemployment.

We cannot allow the bosses to drive us into the dirt in their attempt to drag their system out of crisis.

It is also crucial that the TUC now names the day for a 24-hour general strike. This must involve workers in the public sector, but also the private sector.

Private sector workers coming out on strike would allow the labour movement to strike a decisive blow to the bosses where it really hurts - their profits!

■ The civil servants union PCS has pointed out that cuts recently announced to England's Skills Funding Agency will mean a 40% reduction in the number of staff working on apprenticeships.

PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka said: "with youth unemployment remaining high it makes no sense to take an axe to the staff who provide vital help and support for skills and apprenticeships.

"Cuts on this scale would not only be a tragedy for the individuals who lose their jobs, but also for school leavers, students, apprentices and businesses."