

Russia, spies and nerve agents

Should anyone accept Theresa May's and the Labour right's version of events?

Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary

Jeremy Corbyn is broadly right and his pro-capitalist critics both within the Tory government and their Labour fifth column in the Parliamentary Labour Party are wrong and lying in their responses to the recent use of nerve agents in Britain.

Of course, it is reprehensible for any human being - whether it is in Syria or London - to be subject to these fiendish and torturous weapons. But they are a reality of the barbarism of modern warfare.

Jeremy has correctly cautioned against the rush to judgement to blame Russia for the poisoning - if it is true - of former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia.

He pointed out that not even Theresa May in the first instance apportioned blame to Putin's government but conceded that the Russian state had allowed the possibility for "these deadly toxins to slip out of the control" of the government.

However, why should anyone accept May and the Labour right's version of events after their dirty record in situations like this? The same people [joined hands in accepting the lies of the Blair government and its 'dirty dossier'](#) that led to the Iraq war, arguing that cast-iron existence of weapons of mass destruction existed.

This was then used to justify the [destruction and mayhem in Iraq through a devastating and unsuccessful war](#) and later in the wider Middle East as well. The inevitable consequences were terrorism both in the region and the rest of the world.

No wonder a writer in the Financial Times, which also supported the Iraq war, wrote recently that Tony Blair was the most hated public figure in Britain!

But any opposition to the government's case is swept away by the childish 'Defence' Secretary Gavin Williamson, who declared that Russia should "go away and shut up".

One wag answered him on Twitter: "Russia better take heed. If they are not careful Gavin won't let them play on his Play Station either"!

The USSR

Formerly, Western capitalism opposed the Soviet Union until 1991 because it represented at bottom a different and antagonistic social system to capitalism.

It was based upon nationalisation of industry and planning, albeit controlled by a privileged bureaucratic elite.

Moreover, right from the outset, with the [creation of a democratic workers' state following the Russian Revolution](#), the capitalists ganged up to try and crush the workers and peasants of Russia.

Winston Churchill was prominent in this campaign which involved the "use of the chemical weapon diphenylaminechloroarsine [a riot control agent also known as Adamsite or DM], dropped by British planes fighting the Bolsheviks in north Russia during the summer of 1919" ([letter in the Guardian](#), 12 March 2018).

Later, world capitalism and the Stalinist states were locked into merciless and destructive competition to outdo each other in the acquisition of nuclear and other weapons, such as nerve agents, for possible use

against the other side.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the return to capitalism of Russia and its former satellites was enthusiastically welcomed.

Putin, who was one of the agents of this change, was subsequently fulsomely praised by Blair and Bush. He was no longer just 'Putin' but 'our friend Vladimir', along with his oligarch friends.

This new capitalist regime and its state in Russia handed over industry, treasure of the Russian people, to a gang of kleptocrats, the oligarchs. Putin himself became one of them and is reputed to be now the richest man in Russia.

Rival capitalist powers

This cosy relationship has now given way to conflict, which is no longer between two social systems but rival capitalist/imperialist powers and blocs fighting for influence and control throughout the world.

In other words, a new inter-imperialist rivalry exists. The struggle for economic and military domination which existed in the pre-1914 period and then again before 1939 culminated eventually in a world war.

Today a world war is effectively ruled out because of the existence of 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD) although Trump in the US and his counterpart Kim Jong-un in North Korea [with their nuclear sabre rattling](#) seem to be ignoring this danger!

As the conflict in the Middle East has demonstrated, Russia has now re-emerged if not yet with the full economic weight of the past, nevertheless as an energy superpower and effective military machine.

This proved to be decisive alongside Iranian military forces in the outcome of the Syrian war which saw Iran emerge as the 'regional winner'.

It is these factors which explain the intensified hostility, not just of May and the British capitalists but of other capitalist powers who belatedly joined with her in condemning the Russian state in the alleged use in Britain of the nerve agent Novichok.

Novichok

But a number of authoritative writers and commentators, such as the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray and journalist Seamus Martin, have undermined the veracity of May's case and Russia's use of this nerve agent in Britain.

Murray points out: "As recently as 2016 Dr Robin Black, Head of the Detection Laboratory at the UK's only chemical weapons facility at Porton Down, a former colleague of Dr David Kelly [who committed suicide over the dossier on Iraq], published in an extremely prestigious scientific journal that the evidence for the existence of Novichoks was scant and their composition unknown."

Black wrote: "There has been much speculation that a fourth generation of nerve agents, 'Novichoks' (newcomer), was developed in Russia, beginning in the 1970s" but no hard evidence and no "structures of all the properties" of these had been published.

Murray comments: "Yet now, the British government is claiming to be able instantly to identify a substance which its only biological weapons research centre has never seen before and was unsure of its existence. Worse, it claims to be able not only to identify it, but to pinpoint its origin ... It is plain that claim cannot be true."

He also points out: "Porton Down has acknowledged in publications it has never seen any Russian 'novichoks'. The UK government has absolutely no 'fingerprint' information such as impurities that can safely attribute this substance to Russia."

Originally, May refused to provide a sample to the international body dealing with these kinds of weapons - the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Now Foreign minister Boris Johnson has belatedly promised to grant the request of Russia to do so. We await the outcome!

But Murray also points out that the programme for this weapon "was in the Soviet Union but far away from modern Russia, at Nukus in modern Uzbekistan." He had "visited the Nukus chemical weapon site ... It was dismantled and made safe and all the stocks destroyed and the equipment removed by the American government, as I recall finishing while I was Ambassador there. There has in fact never been any evidence that any 'novichok' ever existed in Russia itself".

Of course, there may be some factors which Murray was not aware of and will subsequently come to light.

But there is enough doubt cast by this and by an equally sceptical article in the Irish Times by Seamus Martin, the paper's former Moscow correspondent, which backs up and reinforces Murray's argumentation.

He writes that: "Those who became extremely rich by selling natural resources, military equipment or anything they could get their hands on became known as the Russian oligarchs, but not all the oligarchs were Russian. The main production plant for Novichok was in Uzbekistan."

And it was oligarchs who stole from the Russian people their wealth who have filled the coffers of the Tory party with huge financial donations estimated at £820,000.

Now Tory Chancellor Philip Hammond has refused to return the money because he did not want to tar the oligarchs "with Putin's brush". Putin is flesh of the flesh to these gangster capitalists and we have opposed him and his regime from the outset.

Notwithstanding his likely victory in the election on Sunday, colossal forces of opposition are developing amongst the working class and the youth in Russia and in all the states which were originally part of the Soviet Union.

Sanctions

The purpose of this campaign by Britain and its temporary 'allies' against Russia now, which has taken on a sharp character, is to further undermine Russia through sanctions. This probably will amount to merely trimming the fingernails of the oligarchs in London and Europe but little else.

The labour movement should propose effective workers' sanctions against this obscene plutocracy in London and elsewhere.

To begin with, all empty property - estimated by the think tank IPPR, to be 216,000 homes in England empty for six months - should be immediately taken over to house the Grenfell and other homeless tenants.

Not just those of the Russian super-rich but also the Chinese, Asian and other oligarchs who control great chunks of London and other European capitals.

However, the sanctions already in place as 'punishment' for Russia's military interventions in the Ukraine and Crimea by Germany and the EU have proved to be ineffective. Before this latest conflict there were proposals for them to be scaled down and eventually dismantled. A further round of measures is likely to amount to a slap on the wrist for Russia.

In answer to the European and US ruling class, Putin has taken retaliatory measures, with his latest nuclear tests - which he boasted would provide Russia with military-installed nuclear weapons in the enclave of Kaliningrad. This is a warning to the European and other capitalist powers.

This points towards an intensified clash between the rival capitalist powers and blocs. The European labour movement and working class in general should take an independent class position - rejecting all proposals for the governments of the rich to ratchet up tensions that already exist and particularly to oppose increased arms

expenditure, which the Tories are openly canvassing for in Britain, which is one of the reasons for this latest campaign.

As if enfeebled British capitalism with its puny military forces in comparison to other major military powers could seriously challenge Russia! It is like pitting a peashooter against a tank!

In answer to Britain's military bluster, the late Tony Benn pointed out that Britain's reduced military prowess would not even allow it to occupy the Isle of Wight, never mind launch another Falklands adventure!

The conflict in Labour

Alongside this propaganda war and nerve agents, [another war is taking place in Britain - within the Labour Party](#).

This is a consequence of the incomplete Corbyn revolution - the toleration of unreconstructed Blairites and the refusal of part of the left, in Momentum, to fight for and implement mandatory reselection together with a drive against the right.

This conflict reveals once more and very starkly Labour's continuing divisions, the two parties in one - with the right openly sabotaging Corbyn in debates in the House of Commons on this issue.

This came from the usual suspects: defeated leadership candidates Yvette Cooper and Owen Smith, John Woodcock, Stella Creasy and Chuka Umunna.

Umunna famously declared in 2014, when he was still comfortably ensconced as a Blairite: "We're all capitalists now". When applied to himself, this was very accurate but not to the leftward-moving ranks of Labour.

In the House of Commons, their espousing of the 'national interest' instead of the internationalist interests of the working class gave warning of their future treacherous role.

In the same 'national interest' they could do as Ramsay MacDonald did in 1931 and split a Labour government, led by Corbyn, and form a new 'national' one with Labour's opponents in the ranks of the Tories and Liberals.

Their position and those on the right who share their approach is part of the campaign to picture Jeremy Corbyn and Labour as 'untrustworthy' of office and 'unpatriotic'.

They hope they can restore support for May and the Tories through a new patriotic campaign. Jeremy Corbyn and the left will be featured as the 'enemy within' and Corbyn, following [the attempt to suggest he was a Czech spy](#), as the 'spy who came in from the allotment'!

Denunciations of the Russian government and assassination are completely hypocritical on the part of the British and other capitalists.

Yes, the Russian government of oligarchs and Putin himself has not been squeamish about eliminating opponents. Nor has the British government, as shown by the targeted assassination in Gibraltar of IRA suspects, and the elimination of opponents through unmanned drones.

The labour movement can only free itself from these horrors - including the use of nerve gas, targeted killings, new conflicts and wars - by helping capitalism off the stage of history and establishing a new democratic socialist society.

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Hands off free school meals!

Tories cut 1m school meals: fight for full funding

Sheila Caffrey, school teacher, Bristol North Socialist Party

This year, the government's April Fools' prank is one of the sickest yet. While MPs' basic salaries rise to £77,379, the Tories want to cut access to free school meals for a million children.

They insist this cut is reasonable as parents who earn more than £7,400 - which with universal credit brings their income up to £18,000 - 'should' be able to afford school meals every day.

This starkly contradicts the reality seen by most working class families.

Foodbanks report requests double in school holidays. A cross-party parliamentary group found up to three million children were at risk of going hungry in the holidays. And research by the National Union of Teachers found teachers estimate a third of children return to school after the holidays with signs of malnourishment.

MPs recognise the need for good quality food at lunch. Indeed, their complaints about their own food - subsidised in parliament by our taxes - include the lack of salmon, insufficiently thick meat slices, and the froth not being up to standard on their cappuccinos.

But this care goes out the window when considering the needs of working class children.

There are countless examples of how high-quality food provided in schools can have a significant impact on a child's health and development.

Not only does eating a healthy school meal improve children's concentration during afternoon lessons and have a positive impact on classroom behaviour. It also develops [healthy eating habits](#) and has the potential to decrease health inequalities.

There is research that clearly shows the link between nutritious food and positive mental health. We should take this seriously bearing in mind studies show we have some of the most [stressed and unhappy children](#) in Europe!

Nationally, 22% of children eat free school meals. In Bristol, where I live, this rises to 37%. Private companies provide all school meals in the city, making profits from children's need to eat.

In the neighbouring local authority of Bath and North East Somerset, school meals aren't privatised. However, the council has raised the cost for each meal above the amount provided for free school meals. This means schools already struggling for money are subsidising meals which supposedly are already paid for.

So why did the Tory government [extend access to free school meals](#) in the first place? During its vicious cuts to school funding, the government could allege it was doing more to support pupils most in need, through free school meals and the 'pupil premium' budget.

This is provided to schools on a student-by-student basis, depending on the amount who are in receipt of free school meals either now or in the previous six years. However, this has actually reduced overall funding and extended the inequalities between schools.

In the June general election, 750,000 voters said cuts to school funding caused them to change their vote, showing the strength of feeling towards schools and education. The Tories backtracked in July on £1.3 billion of their proposed education cuts, but even reversing all the cuts isn't enough.

[We need substantial investment in schools](#), to guarantee free, nutritious meals for all school and nursery students, and reduce teacher workload and class sizes. We need to scrap universal credit and replace it with living benefits - and a minimum wage of at least £10 an hour now, as a step towards a real living wage for all.

By investing in free school meals and education, as well as the NHS and all public services, and decent housing and wages, all children could grow into healthy adults. Everyone could play a part in a socialist society - rather than being forced to beg like Oliver Twist.

The Blairites are NHS privatisers - to save it means sacking them

Jon Dale, secretary, Unite Notts NHS branch (personal capacity)

Alan Milburn was Tony Blair's health secretary for four years.

He [brought in 'foundation trusts' - preparing more NHS privatisation](#). And he brought in many more ['private finance initiatives' \(PFIs\) that suck huge sums from the NHS](#).

Since leaving parliament in 2010 he has kept busy.

He joined corporate services giant PricewaterhouseCoopers as chair of its UK Health Industry Oversight Board, whose objective is to "drive change in the health sector, and assist PwC in growing its presence in the health market."

He is chair of the European Advisory Board at Bridgepoint Capital, whose activities include financing private health companies making money from the NHS. He is also a member of Lloyds Pharmacy's Healthcare Advisory Panel.

Milburn helped the Tory-Liberal coalition and then Tory governments as their 'social mobility' commissioner until resigning in December. Perhaps that's why he now has time to take on a new job.

Private health group Ribera Salud has appointed him to its board of directors. It is 50% owned by the US health giant Centene, and 50% by the Catalan bank Banco Sabadell.

Ribera Salud has won part of a contract to run Nottingham's 'integrated care system' for the NHS and city council - and aims to get more profitable contracts coming its way.

Milburn is still a member of Progress, the Blairite 'party within a party' trying to undermine Corbyn and policies like ending privatisation.

Defending the NHS means [fighting to end that influence among Labour MPs and councillors](#) - including by winning democratic rights like mandatory reselection and kicking out the Blairites.

Cuts harm kids' health

Workers can beat NHS cuts and sell-offs

Tom Costello, Lancashire Socialist Party

A total of 96 hospitals and service providers have substandard safety in children's healthcare, according to February's CQC inspection.

The primary reason the report cites is an all-time low level of staffing, with 36,000 vital nurse positions remaining unfilled.

And the ongoing crisis for kids does not end there. In less than five years, the amount of child psychiatrists has fallen by 7% from 1,015 full-time positions to just 948.

Estimates suggest up to 50,000 children and young people will be [losing out on vital mental health attention](#). Meanwhile cases of young people with anxiety, depression and eating disorders continue to skyrocket.

Last year's election manifesto from Jeremy Corbyn promised an extra £7 billion a year for the health service. This is a definite step in the right direction.

But any approach to saving our NHS will inevitably have to confront the defining problem: the interference of parasitic private companies in essential public services.

Far from the secure, publicly owned NHS we all want, our health service is being eaten away at by a band of exploitative profiteers backed by the Tories [and Blairites](#).

Privatisation

This crisis is not just a case of underfunding. Underfunding itself is part of a backdoor scheme to dismantle and privatise our health service carried out by successive capitalist governments.

But there has been a radical upsurge in activity to defend our health service from this process, seen in the heroic efforts of workers and communities across the country. From the [junior doctors' strikes in 2016](#), to last year's [victories against closures in Leicester](#) and [Mansfield](#) - where Socialist Party members played leading roles.

A confident, [united and dedicated mass campaign could smash this onslaught](#). The trade union leaders must capitalise on working class anger and build for coordinated action to finish the job off.

Hated Blairite mayor ousted: now fight for a no-cuts Newham!

Lois Austin, TUSC mayoral candidate in 2014

Hated Blairite mayor of Newham Sir Robin Wales has lost the Labour candidacy. We congratulate Councillor Rokhsana Fiaz on being selected as the candidate for the upcoming May elections.

Wales has presided over decades of [cuts to services and council jobs](#), the [eviction of the E15 single mums](#), and massive privatisations. He led the east London borough's council for 23 years.

Before that, in the 1970s and 1980s, Wales played a major role in [expelling Militant - forerunner of the Socialist Party - from Labour](#). He once took part in the 'Icepick Express' contingent of right-wingers to Labour student conference.

We believe Rokhsana represents a break from this. We look forward to working with her and any Labour Party members who want to use this as an opportunity to fight cuts and sell-offs in Newham.

We support Rokhsana's policies of building 1,000 council homes and supporting [striking teachers and parents opposing schools being turned into privatised 'academies'](#).

Newham council recently voted to reverse its long-held position of support for academisation. We believe Rokhsana and other anti-academies councillors should commit to calling a referendum on academies in Newham. At Avenue School, a survey of parents returned a resounding no to academies with 132 votes to four.

It's also vital that an anti-austerity mayor use council reserves and borrowing powers to end the cuts now. By mobilising the local workforce and community, we can fight for more funding from central government.

The removal of Robin Wales shows ordinary [Labour members are willing to campaign against Blairite policies at a council level in Newham](#).

I stood as a Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) candidate contesting the mayor's pro-austerity position in 2014. Then and now, TUSC's policies are much closer to Jeremy Corbyn than the vast majority of Newham Labour councillors.

TUSC will not be standing for mayor against Rokhsana in May as her selection is a positive step towards a fightback in Newham. We hope to work with her in fighting cuts and privatisation.

But we are planning to stand against the worst and most vicious Blairite and pro-academies councillors in Newham. These councillors have nothing in common with Jeremy Corbyn or those who have been inspired by his leadership.

The transformation of Newham Labour has just begun. Now we need 100% anti-austerity, anti-academisation, pro-union, anti-big landlords councillors.

Them & us

Let them hang

Bosses for part of bailed-out bank RBS told staff to let small businesses "hang themselves" if they got in financial trouble.

As many as 50 small businesses closed a day in late 2008 because of the crash the bankers caused, according to the Federation of Small Businesses. And by September last year, public sector employment had fallen by a million from its high in September 2009, according to the ONS.

Having helped crash the economy, RBS received £45 billion of taxpayers' money to shore up its bottom line and bosses' bonuses.

Bosses booted

Of course, not all the toffs are getting it their way right now.

Lady Barbara Judge had to step down as chair of the Institute of Directors following claims of racist and sexist comments. She allegedly said of bosses' club secretaries: "the problem is that we have one black and we have one pregnant woman and that is the worst combination we could possibly have."

And 'Tatler Tory' Mark Clarke was forced from his cushy directorial post at multinational Unilever following sexual harassment claims. Readers may recall he was accused of bullying a young Tory activist who later died by suicide in 2015.

Faulty fire doors

Fire doors at Grenfell Tower meant to hold back flames for half an hour last just 15 minutes. Police investigators report they have failed basic safety tests.

Working fire doors alone would not have prevented [the Grenfell atrocity](#). Profiteering property management still had the tower wrapped in flammable plastic. But it shows there's no end to capitalism's corner-cutting for

profit.

Infant mortality

Britain's infant mortality rates have started to rise again, after years of going down.

In 2015, 2.6 newborns died for every 1,000 births. In the next year this rose to 2.7, according to the ONS. The death rate for babies in their first year rose from 3.7 for every 1,000 to 3.8 in 2016.

Poverty everywhere

Even better-off districts are home to "intense" child poverty. In Scotland, 468,430 income-deprived people live in areas which are not considered "multiple-deprived," according to research by Glasgow Caledonian University.

Schools broke

Four in five quasi-privatised 'academy' schools are running budget deficits - even more than council-run schools. The research comes from accountancy network Kreston UK.

This follows revelations that the number of publicly run secondary schools in deficit has almost tripled in three years. 9% were in deficit in 2013-14, compared to 26% in 2016-17, according to the Education Policy Institute think-tank.

West Virginia teachers' strike victory

Militant struggle rolls back bosses' anti-worker offensive

Striking teachers in the Republican-controlled US state of West Virginia have won a significant pay rise. Their illegal strike has become a cause celebre for trade unionists and socialists, showing that determined militant action by workers can halt the current capitalist offensive to drive down living standards and working conditions. Charles Cannon, of Socialist Alternative in the US (co-thinkers of the Socialist Party) reports on the strike and its valuable lessons.

"Until they sign it, shut it down!" chanted West Virginia teachers from all 55 counties across the state at a demonstration in the capitol building, Charleston, on the eighth day of an illegal strike.

The assembled teachers, three quarters of them women, defied insults hurled at them by politicians calling them "dumb bunnies" and "rednecks", by wearing bunny ears and red bandanas.

Winning a 5% raise for all public employees in a 'red' state (ie the party colour of the Republicans) that only recently passed anti-union 'right-to-work' legislation, the teachers exposed the mass anger in society against the neoliberal agenda of cuts to education, healthcare, and social services alongside handouts to the super-rich and corporations.

The victory is likely to inspire an increased determination by working people to fight for a decent standard of living. In Oklahoma, one of the few states that pay teachers less than West Virginia, teachers are now planning a state-wide walkout in April. There is also talk of strike action by teachers in Kentucky, Arizona and New Jersey.

As the Supreme Court considers the Janus case (see below) the teachers' stand is all the more inspiring. This fight shows that working people and unions do not need to take these attacks as done deals - they can be

beaten back!

After 30 years of retreat by the labour movement which has seen union membership decimated, West Virginia teachers have drawn a line in the sand.

Background

Third-lowest paid in the nation and facing not only a teacher shortage but increasingly difficult challenges (many students are from impoverished homes, in the midst of a raging opioid epidemic), West Virginia teachers had had enough.

Echoing the ghosts of past militant labour struggles, the strike was born out of a rank-and-file revolt and deep reservoirs of class consciousness.

Reacting to pitiful wage increases that did nothing to cover out of control health costs, teachers demanded a 5% pay hike for all public employees and for the legislature to address the ballooning costs of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

Represented by two unions, the West Virginia Educators Association (WVEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), it was an emerging layer of rank-and-file leaders who organised the strike in the weeks and months leading up to it, while the top leadership of the unions had failed to mobilise teachers.

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal baron, has, like previous governors, given huge tax breaks to extractive industries such as coal and natural gas. His administration has imposed austerity while he owes millions in back taxes in West Virginia as well as Kentucky.

Bernie Sanders won all 55 West Virginia counties in the 2016 Democratic primary. No wonder, since Hillary Clinton was quoted as saying "I'll put coal miners out of business."

Clinton's neoliberal policies in the general election were overwhelmingly rejected by voters. But without a credible pro-working class candidate on the ballot, this opened the door to the right populism of Donald Trump.

While anti-immigrant sentiment certainly played a significant role, West Virginians primarily voted for promises of jobs and protectionist trade policies.

Many on the American liberal left dismissed the working class in states like West Virginia, which voted 68.7% for Trump, as one reactionary mass. In contrast, Socialist Alternative explained the contradictory reality and the need for the labour movement to take a stand by addressing the common interests of all working people while also boldly fighting racism, nativism and sexism.

The West Virginia teachers, less likely to vote Trump than the state as a whole and also inspired by the emerging women's movement, point precisely to the class contradictions in Trump country. Led in part by the left, the rank-and-file revolt won the support of the mass of the West Virginia working class in a stand-up fight with a reactionary, Republican-dominated legislature.

In the months leading up to the strike, the WVEA and AFT leaders attempted in vain to prevent a strike through backroom negotiations with the state legislature.

The union leaders, not anticipating or wanting a strike, failed, in the words of one teacher to "do the job we are paying them to do, organise a strike."

When it began, they had little ability to contain it as action had been organised from the bottom up. As a result, a new radical leadership is developing within the teachers' unions in West Virginia, some of them identifying as socialists.

The teachers built solidarity with other school service personnel and more broadly, through demanding a 5% raise for all public sector workers. The strike vote included non-union members and the community was actively involved in the strike.

This built a strong movement that was able to stand up to hardline tactics from the state legislature and public attacks on the strike by Republican legislators.

Through their own families, many teachers were connected to militant labour traditions of the past, especially of the mineworkers.

One teacher, echoing a common sentiment, said: "If the strike is illegal, all that means is that we don't have to play by the rules they made for us."

Showdown

When union leaders and the Democrats announced on 27 February, three days into the strike, that a deal had been made with the governor to give teachers a 5% raise and all other public employees a 3% raise, they asked teachers to trust them to finalise the deal and go back to work.

The teachers were seething with anger. Faith in the politicians' 'guarantees' had evaporated and they saw that the status of PEIA was not addressed.

As the union leaders failed to respond to workers' questions about the deal, rank-and-file leaders encouraged teachers to stay on strike. The teachers voted the next day with their feet to continue the strike.

When the state legislature attempted to punish the strikers by lowering the raise to 4%, teachers threatened to occupy the capitol building.

The strike being already underway, teachers prepared over the weekend for the long haul, vowing to remain until their demands were met and to accept no compromises or promises. By Monday night, 5 March, it appeared that the strike would continue indefinitely.

On the morning of 6 March, union leaders and Democratic Party politicians attempted to demobilise and end the strike yet again. Alongside the governor, they appeared before the striking teachers massed outside the state senate doors to announce that the strike had been won and that the teachers should go home.

Shouting from the crowd, many teachers asked to see this victory in writing. Teachers and other workers chanted "Words mean nothing, sign the bill!"

It quickly became clear that no one would leave until the bill was signed. The Democratic Party responded that, according to the state senate rules, they had to wait 24 hours for the finance committee to review the bill before they could sign it. To this the teachers responded with chants of "Until they sign it, shut it down!"

After a few hours, all the supposed red tape that Democrats had used as an excuse for why the bill could not be finalised disappeared and both houses had signed the bill.

While the 5% increase is a clear victory, the question of healthcare costs remains to be properly addressed. This could spark another phase of the struggle in coming months.

The West Virginia strike showed the country what solidarity looks like. The \$320,000 plus raised online for the strike fund and the hundreds of pizzas rolled in on carts daily, paid for by the San Francisco teachers union, are the most visible examples. The strongest show of solidarity came from the working class across the state of West Virginia itself.

Socialist Alternative members from Pittsburgh, Columbus, Philadelphia, and Seattle travelled to Charleston to stand in solidarity with the striking teachers.

We engaged in many conversations, listening to what workers had to say and expressing our support for their struggle. Teachers were more than happy to talk to us even though there was some suspicion of 'socialism'. But once we established that we were there to listen and support their struggle, they were actually excited to speak with open socialists.

Lessons

The key question coming out of this strike for the labour movement nationally is whether this is the beginning of a real turnaround after decades of retreat.

There were specific factors that helped the teachers in West Virginia, including powerful traditions of solidarity and the serious shortage of qualified teachers.

The current threat of strike action by teachers in other states points to how this can spread but, at this stage, the upsurge is centred on teachers and there are very specific reasons for that. 20 years of savage attacks on public education have left teachers across the country deeply discontented.

The role of women in these movements can't be understated. Women in labour unions have a pivotal role to play in building a wider fightback by working people.

The momentum coming out of the West Virginia victory is a crucial opportunity to start a serious fightback of public sector workers, led by militant teacher unions. But there are real obstacles facing insurgent forces in the public sector unions, including the leadership of the national teacher unions which have favoured trying to use 'political influence', rather than collective power to push back.

In practice, this almost always means supporting and lobbying Democrats. But under Obama, the Democrats were in the lead in attacking teachers through high stakes testing, attacking seniority rights, and privatisation schemes, including trying to replace public schools with charter schools.

In the era of Trump, the stakes are even higher. Trump's solicitor general was in front of the Supreme Court right before the West Virginia strike presenting arguments supporting Janus anti-union law suit (see box) and attacking the role of public sector unions for allegedly "compelling" people they represent to give union dues.

As we have consistently said in relation to Janus, labour needs a strategy that is not based on accepting that we will inevitably lose.

Workplace meetings and rallies should be held at every unionised public sector workplace in the country against Janus. This should be the launching point for a massive national day of action. This will put the labour movement on a direct collision course with Trump, the Republicans and the whole corporate elite but that's exactly what needs to happen.

West Virginia shows that even under reactionary administrations, offensive struggles can be waged and gains won. As in previous periods, socialists will have a key role to play in that effort.

- [Read the full article at socialistworld.net](http://socialistworld.net)

Anti-union laws

The 'Janus v American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees' hearing in the Supreme Court will determine nationally whether public sector trade unions will retain the right to collect dues or 'fair agency fees' from non-union members covered by workplace collective bargaining agreements.

The status quo has existed since 1977 and is based on the fact that non-union members benefit from the union's collective agreement with the employer and therefore should contribute to union funds.

Republican-controlled West Virginia state, after a delay, enacted a misnamed 'right to work' law last year that outlaws these collective bargaining arrangements. 28 states have similar 'right to work' anti-union laws.

A right-wing neoliberal offensive in recent years, backed by corporate billionaires, has targeted union organisation and rights in order to make it easier to super-exploit workers.

US school shootings: student walkouts challenge establishment

On 14 March, nearly a million students in the USA walked out of their schools to demand an end to gun violence. Some of these protests are reported below.

These walkouts come after last February's [horrific massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida](#), in which 17 students were murdered and many more injured.

After a seemingly endless catalogue of school massacres by gunmen there is now a growing student movement demanding action to stop the violence through gun control. The movement has also denounced the powerful National Rifle Association (NRA), which backed Trump's presidential campaign, and the largely Republican politicians who do the bidding for the highly profitable gun lobby.

In an article on 21 February ([Parkland School massacre: Youth rise up against violence and the NRA](#)) Stephen Edwards of Socialist Alternative (US co-thinkers of the Socialist Party) wrote: "The enormous number of military-style weapons that are available in the US present a clear and present danger to working class people and youth. A majority agree that we need reasonable limits on the type of firearms available, and also restrictions on the ability of people with a history of violence and threats of violence to have access to them."

...

"There are many reasons for the scale of violence but all point back to the savage history of American capitalism and the brutal alienation and inequality it engenders today." ... "We reject the idea that only the state can be trusted with weapons. The history of police and military interventions is one of attacks on unions and civil rights organisations... And as we have seen in too many instances, the ability of the police to shoot unarmed suspects, particularly people of colour, without consequence."

San Francisco

Thousands of students from high schools across San Francisco protested against the NRA, the gun manufacturers, and the broader systemic violence of racism and exploitation that they've grown up in. At 10.30am, students began crowding the steps of City Hall, despite a heavy mid-morning rain.

Every ten minutes for an hour, a new contingent of students would arrive, swelling their numbers to roughly a thousand, and forcing the closure of the street.

While a few politicians came out to voice their support for the demonstrators, the one hour rally had a majority of student speakers.

Almost everyone highlighted the criminal role the NRA has played in profiting off the deaths of students. Several student speakers linked their call for gun control, with the need to end racism and sexism, and situated gun violence within the broader systemic violence caused by capitalism.

After the rally ended, students began their march to San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square - one of the more popular tourist destinations in the city.

Storming down Market Street, students took turns leading chants of "Hey, hey, NRA, how many kids did you kill today?", along with "What do we want? Gun control. When do we want it? Now!", and "No more silence! End gun violence!"

Student leaders made clear that this was just the beginning, and pointed to the March for Our Lives on 24 March as a next step towards building a youth-led movement for gun control. One speaker received strong applause when he spoke to the need to keep their movement independent from the politicians.

Chicago

Well over 1,000 students walked out of Lane Tech in a student-organised, albeit administration-sanctioned, event.

The response to our flyer and our slogans 'end gun violence', 'sustain the student movement', and 'fight back against capitalism' was met with enthusiastic support.

Columbus

The Columbus City schools board declared 14 March to be a district-wide "safer together day" in support of the walkouts, but it was student leaders in high schools across the district who took action in planning the walkouts and rallied their classmates together to speak out against gun violence and the NRA.

Organisers with the local Youth Empower group, a youth organisation of the Women's March, played an important role in helping coordinate, promote, and support the student organising efforts.

At South High School, a predominantly black high school on the south side of Columbus, approximately 200 students walked out of classes in freezing temperatures and gathered on the track field for 17 minutes in honour of the Parkland shooting victims.

Student organisers voiced the need for continued action, in the form of walkouts and rallies, to push legislators to pass meaningful gun reform to address the epidemic of mass school shootings. There was an understanding that youth will need to keep building pressure and organising walkouts, protests, and occupations to force politicians to acquiesce to demands for gun control.

While there was overwhelming support for a ban on assault weapons, students correctly recognised the persistent action that will be needed to effectively challenge the corporate status quo politicians who accept thousands in donations from the NRA.

Many students also called for broader demands to address school and community safety. About 300 students descended on the state capital building to speak with representatives and to hold a rally on the steps of the Statehouse.

During the rally, students included calls to demilitarise schools and fund social workers and counsellors. The rally ended with chants of "Counsellors not cuffs!"

Organisations including Socialist Alternative have been working alongside students from across the region to mobilise the largest possible turnout on 24 March.

Seattle

Students held signs with slogans like "#Enough", "Arm me with books not bullets", "Not today NRA" and "Fear has no place in our schools #NeverAgain".

Despite the nationwide call only being for a 17-minute walkout, students from across the city stayed out and converged on the University of Washington for a more sustained protest and march.

Many high school students Socialist Alternative spoke to identified as socialists. Some even were conscious of capitalism as a root cause of alienation and gun violence, as well as seeing the need for fundamental system change.

- [Read the full reports at socialistalternative.org](http://socialistalternative.org)

Brazil: Psol councillor Marielle Franco murdered in Rio de Janeiro

Statement by LSR (Liberty, Socialism and Revolution - CWI in Brazil)

On 14 March, Marielle Franco, a veteran member of Psol (Socialism and Liberty Party - a broad left formation which LSR help found and actively participates in) in Rio de Janeiro, was barbarically executed in the city centre. Anderson Pedro Gomes, the driver of her car, also died in the attack.

Police investigation identified nine bullet holes in the back window of the car, showing that the murderers targeted Marielle, and knew where in the car she was sitting despite the blacked-out windows.

A black, lesbian mother, Marielle lived in the Favela of Mare, in Rio, where she worked in defence of black women and human rights.

She was a long-time militant activist for just causes in the interests of the city's poor.

A popular councillor, she was a leading voice in the struggle against systemic barbaric police violence in the favelas of Rio against poor and black people.

In Brazil, a young black person is murdered every 21 minutes. Of every 100 people assassinated in Brazil, 71 are black.

Murders of black women grew by 22% between 2005 and 2015, when non-black deaths fell by 7.4% in the same period.

In the beginning of February, the corrupt government of billionaire president Michel Temer decreed a federal intervention in the state of Rio de Janeiro in questions relating to public security.

He put an army general in charge of security and promoted military intervention into the favelas and communities.

Marielle Franco was a central leader of opposition to this intervention. Two weeks before her murder, she was appointed head of the commission set up by the council to oversee the intervention.

Three days before her murder Marielle denounced the arbitrary and abusive actions of military police in the Acari favela, where residents were killed by the 41st battalion of the military police, known as the "battalion of death".

Death squads

The corruption, violence and racism of the Rio military police and their links to death squads are obvious.

There can be no doubt that the murder of Marielle is related to her struggle against this situation.

In recent years, mainly after [the parliamentary coup which brought Michel Temer to power](#), Brazil has seen a qualitative increase in state and extra-institutional repression against social movements.

This repression and criminalisation of movements and leaders can use new institutional measures brought in by the PT (Workers' Party) in government, mainly during the World Cup and Olympics.

We have seen activists and leaders systematically threatened, attacked and killed.

Two days before Marielle's murder, a leader of the amazon people, Paulo Sérgio Almeida Nascimento, was killed by four bullets in Barcarena (Para state).

Paolo was leading a struggle against the Norwegian mining company, Hydro, which wanted to build a basin in this region with a dramatic impact on the environment and lives of the local population.

As a consequence of the crisis and the attacks on the workers and poor, there has been resistance, despite not yet having the necessary coordination and strategy to bring victory.

It is fundamental that we unite the struggles in defence of our lives and our rights. It is crucial to build a left, socialist alternative for the working class and all oppressed and exploited people.

- [Read the full statement at socialistworld.net](http://socialistworld.net)
-

UCU strike: staff and students unite to continue pensions fight after magnificent 14 days of action

Sam Morecroft, Sheffield UCU anti-casualisation officer (personal capacity)

University and College Union (UCU) members at 64 universities have completed a [historic 14-day programme of strike action](#) in defence of pensions.

This is the first phase of our industrial action. If Universities UK (UUK) does not agree a deal which protects our current 'defined benefit' pensions there will be further strikes after the Easter break.

In the course of this strike, not only have the turnout [thresholds for national industrial action set out in the Trade Union Act been well and truly beaten](#), but we have collectively taken more strike days than were taken either in 2015 or 2016 across all sectors!

The energy and power of the strike has been electric. It has forced local university managements all over the country to reverse their position and [plead with UUK for a deal that will satisfy the strikers](#).

Even more impressively, members have not only mobilised against the employer's attack on pensions, but also against the union leadership's attempt to demobilise the strike following concessions.

When the leadership of UCU chose to issue a statement outlining an "agreement" with UUK, suggesting strikes would be called off that teaching rescheduled, the reaction from members on social media was one of visceral rage.

Within less than 24 hours, all but two of the branches on strike had organised emergency meetings and voted to reject the deal.

Well over a thousand demonstrated outside the UCU national office as the union's higher education committee met to discuss the offer.

This [mobilisation of rank-and-file members forced the leadership to drop the plan](#) to suspend strikes and reschedule classes.

In the past, UCU's leadership would have succeeded in demobilising the struggle - but not anymore.

Social media, and Twitter in particular, has been a hugely important tool in this dispute. It has allowed members to discuss the way forward in a way that has largely not been possible within the somewhat empty structures of the union nationally.

But social media is not a substitute for a fighting, democratic and member-led union - the energy and militancy of the strikers must be channelled into transforming UCU.

Members in every branch affected by the dispute are understandably incensed by the lack of leadership shown by Sally Hunt and other full-time officials.

The best way to begin to address that problem would be for UCU branches to demand a national strike committee made up of branch delegates to assume control of the dispute from now on.

Between now and the next phase of industrial action we will be working to contract and refusing to reschedule teaching activity.

But we cannot allow the momentum to dissipate. At nine institutions, management is still threatening punitive pay deductions against members taking action short of a strike by refusing to reschedule teaching.

A call for academic boycott of these institutions has been put forward, although not by UCU officially - [you can read more about it here](#). But this alone is not enough.

Not just UCU but the whole of the trade union movement should put these universities - Aberdeen, Bradford, Bristol, Brunel, City, Leeds, Liverpool, Salford and Surrey - under immense pressure to ensure these threats are withdrawn.

This has already been achieved at several universities, including my own, Sheffield. The Trade Union Congress (TUC) - of which Sally Hunt is currently president! - has been invisible during this dispute.

This is a great opportunity for the TUC to finally show some leadership and coordinate labour movement pressure on these institutions. If it doesn't, union leaders should waste no time in organising together anyway.

UCU members have engaged in a fantastic struggle - not just against the employers, but against our own union leadership when it attempted to demobilise the strikes for a few temporary concessions. But the fight to save our pensions continues.

Brighton

Hundreds of students and lecturers from universities across the country gathered at the University of Sussex on 15 March, for a national demonstration organised by local students, including Socialist Students.

Billed as 'Break UUK, win the strike!' the crowd marched through campus to chants of "students and workers, unite and fight" and "UUK pay attention, staff deserve a decent pension".

Over the past weeks of strike action, various students and staff have expressed their solidarity for their lecturers as they continue to fight against UUK's proposed changes to the pension scheme, which could see lecturers losing up to 40% of their pensions.

The crowd erupted with cheers as it passed Balfour Beatty's construction site on campus, where roughly 19 students went into occupation to protest the pension cuts, as well as for Unite the Union access to the site to prevent blacklisting and to organise workers.

Other students joined the occupation as the crowd passed, bringing the number of students on the site to over a hundred! The construction of new, unaffordable halls while the existing ones lie in disrepair demonstrates how the ongoing process of marketisation has affected students as well as lecturers.

Students distributed leaflets describing their recently launched manifesto - 'Democratise Sussex' - assembled over the last few weeks at meetings of staff and students.

The manifesto demands rent controls and democratic reform in the structure of universities as a step towards preventing the constant attacks on higher education.

Connor Rosoman Sussex Socialist Students

Reading

We have been by our lecturers' side on the picket line every morning showing student solidarity against the pension cuts.

We have seen what unity in power means and how important it is to keep the momentum going. We reject in any way possible these decisions affecting our university!

It is a disgrace to see UUK attack and destroy the education system.

We are not here as enemies of education. We are here to defend it! It is our responsibility as students to have a say in what the university decides. We are not blind consumers of education.

Our demands are:

- The vice-chancellor brings in an independent advisory board of experts to take a new look at the risk evaluation of the USS pension scheme.
- The academic integrity of the research does not hold up to any university standards, therefore the decision to slash pensions by 40% is invalid.
- The university must become fully democratic where all university staff and students must have the ability to control the university's decisions.
- For the vice-chancellor to resign. The university has held a vote of no confidence, where the vast majority of staff have voted for the resignation of the vice-chancellor. We, the students, are now demanding his resignation as we do not see him fit in running our university's future.

Students occupying at Reading University

Glasgow

Close to 100 strikers again picketed Glasgow University on 14 March. Student supporters are 'hard picketing' which involves blocking the main gate to any lecturers who are breaking the strike - a minority.

The Socialist (Scotland) spoke to Jeanette Findley, branch chair of the UCU: "The mood today is even more determined after we told the negotiators what we thought of the offer.

"I don't personally want any changes to the pension scheme and if we are serious and fight hard enough we can force them back I think. 150 new members have joined here since the action."

Matt Dobson

Hinkley workers win back unpaid wages after sit-in protest

Tom Baldwin, South West Socialist Party organiser

Workers building the [Hinkley C nuclear power plant](#) in Somerset have won back unpaid wages after more than 500 staged a two-day sit-in protest.

The dispute arose when workers were sent away on 1 March, as the site was closed due to extreme winter weather.

As with other large construction projects, many workers had travelled from across the country to work on the site and so were unable to return home.

They remained in their digs, ready and available to work their scheduled shifts over the weekend. They were only prevented from working by the heavy snow.

On their return to work on 6 March however, workers for contractors Kier and BAM Nuttall were informed by text that they would not be paid for the days the site was closed.

Trade union agreements state that workers should be paid in these circumstances but the employers were trying it on.

The power station being built for [EDF Energy](#) will be the most expensive structure on Earth when completed, at £19.6 billion.

The contractors concerned are giant construction firms, they're not short a few quid and yet they tried to pick the pockets of their staff.

But workers weren't taking this affront lying down. Hundreds of them then began a sit-in protest in the on-site canteen, refusing to move until they were paid.

Victory came on the second day of the protest. Workers will now be paid in line with union agreements, after talks between Unite the Union and EDF.

When we fight, we can win. However, workers need to be constantly vigilant. Employers already make huge profits exploiting our labour but that won't stop them trying to rob us further in whatever way they can.

Union power and collective action are the only ways to ensure they stick to their agreements.

Strikers and parents rally again in Newham against academies

Helen Pattison, East London Socialist Party

Newham teachers and parents rallied again as Avenue School took its [tenth day of strike action](#) on 15 January.

They were joined at the rally by other anti-academies strikers from [Cumberland](#) and [Keir Hardie](#) schools, also in Newham.

They heard from University and College Union (UCU) and Socialist Party member Keishia Taylor, a postgrad striker at University College London, who raised that [the UCU dispute](#) is about more than pensions. This and previous attacks on staff's terms and conditions are really about marketising higher education.

Martin Powell-Davies, National Education Union (NEU) regional secretary, made it clear these strikes are in opposition to schools becoming academies, not just about terms and conditions.

A recent council meeting voted for a motion opposed to academies. But since that meeting NEU has discovered that [the council's executive](#) has not agreed the motion yet.

Refusing to accept and act on the anti-academies motion now could impact the schools currently in the process of becoming academies, but also expose the undemocratic nature of the Blairite wing of the Labour Party.

Hull college workers ballot for action against mass redundancies

Mike Whale, Hull Trade Union Council

Hull College workers in the University and College Union (UCU) are balloting for strike action to stop the devastating management plans for mass redundancies.

Hull College was held up as a shining example of how privatised management of education would take it forward.

The management is demanding that there will be 231 full-time equivalent redundancies affecting as many as 400 workers.

This is the price that lecturers, support staff and students will have to pay for an alleged £54 million grant from the Educational Funding Agency to try and stabilise the situation.

Part of the plans include major outsourcing of support services in the college. While the ballot is firstly to stop the redundancies, many workers are beginning to raise the demand that the college should be returned to local authority control.

This dispute is an attack on the college but is also an attack on Hull itself. [Hull Trade Union Council will be organising action to support](#) the workers and students in the college.

- Messages of support to Dave Lancaster, UCU: dlangcaster@gmail.com
-

Unions condemn 'culture of bullying' at Merseyside hospital

Rachael Potter, health worker, Liverpool Socialist Party

Many health trusts across the country are [carrying vacant posts](#) and as a result many staff are covering staff shortages by doing duties above and beyond their pay grade.

Trade unions should be challenging employers to ensure that these posts are filled - many staff feel exhausted having to work long hours, many beyond their contractual hours.

An independent report into alleged bullying within the A&E department in Arrowe Park hospital on the Wirral has condemned the trust for a culture of bullying.

In the last couple of months the trust has seen the departure of the head of human resources, the CEO and more recently the chair of the trust.

Sir David Henshaw has also been imposed on the trust by NHS to beef up the management structure. This is the same man who, when chief executive at Liverpool council, encouraged managers who worked there under [Militant's control of the council](#) to seek employment elsewhere.

Full time officials from both Unison and Unite the Union have made it clear to the employer that action speaks louder than words and if this bullying culture does not change then their members will consider taking the appropriate action to stand up to bullying managers.

The unions do not welcome the appointment of Henshaw given his track record with the unions.

NSSN conference moves

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) annual conference has been moved to Saturday 7 July to avoid clashing with the 70th anniversary of the NHS national day of action celebrations. 11am-4.30pm, Conway Hall, London, WC1R 4RL.

Refugees march against racism and to demand rights

Marvin Hay, Socialist Party Black and Asian group

The United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 21 March commemorates the day in 1960 that police opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration against the apartheid pass laws in Sharpeville, South Africa. It has been marked in the UK since 2014 by an anti-racism demonstration.

This year thousands braved the cold to march. One of the chants heard most vehemently was "refugees are welcome here". We agree that people fleeing war, persecution and poverty are welcome but we must go further. Refugees are part of the working class. Refugees need to be able to organise and fight for their rights and fight with the rest of the working class for jobs, homes and services for everyone. This will assist in combating racist division.

[The Refugee Rights campaign](#) made a big splash, and what singled them out was that they were refugees fighting for not only their rights but those of the wider working class. This campaign correctly makes the link between racist immigration policies and the effect of capitalism on the rights and opportunities for the majority of society.

Refugee Rights approached the organisers Stand Up to Racism several times in the run-up to the event to ask that the campaign be allowed to speak on the platform, but were ignored.

The Socialist Party marched together with our refugee comrades demanding that refugees be given the right to work and access to education, highlighting the racist ideology behind detention centres and demanding their immediate closure.

We make the case for a £10 an hour minimum wage and a free NHS, and the right to join a union.

'We are refugees fighting for our rights' was the demand that stuck with me for the day. While people marching say that refugees are welcome, under capitalism they will always be under attack in a society that lines the pockets of the rich and pits layers of the working class against each other to maintain the status quo.

Only through joining the fight for socialism can we truly eradicate racism.

Ideas matter: help us fight to win with May Day greetings

James Ivens, May Day greetings campaign organiser

The May Day greetings deadline for reduced rates is coming: Friday 30 March. Help us get those greetings in! The struggle for socialism needs the Socialist. The Socialist needs funding.

Striking university workers arriving at their central London demonstration smiled seeing Socialist sellers on 14 March. Our front page - ['Determined UCU strikers: we're out to win'](#).

Our coverage is written by strikers themselves. Our strategy - both industrial and political - isn't just about solidarity, but advance.

How can we link up the struggles? How can we beat not just the uni bosses - but the whole boss class?

These questions exercised workers and students in France 50 years ago too. The false analysis and methods of their official leaders ran a revolutionary general strike onto the rocks. Ideas matter.

Corbyn, Brexit, Catalonia, Trump - capitalism is once more preparing for battles over its continued existence. [May Day greetings help finance and publicise](#) the paper that fights to get it right.

[Here's how you can help.](#)

- Union branches, committees and trades councils need urgent contact. They have deadlines for agendas. Propose a motion, or send an appeal for the 'correspondence' business item
- Workplaces can send group greetings from supporters. Use our May Day greetings sign-up sheet
- We want community campaigns to send greetings too. Make sure you invite yours
- Student groups in schools, colleges and universities - if you can't get funding, we'll place your greeting for a whip-round

Let us know what you're planning. And please get in touch if you want resources or support: jamesivens@socialistparty.org.uk. Prices and other details are at socialistparty.org.uk/mayday.

We are proud to have received greetings already from - among others - the Birkenhead bus workers. We backed their [solid strike which won a raise in December](#). Now they're backing us.

Socialist Party members have targets for their regions and some trade union groups. And we want everyone who supports socialist ideas to show their solidarity on our pages. The final deadline is 11 April.

Let's make 2018 another record-breaker. Let's get those greetings in.

Past fund-raising campaigns show dedication to the fight for socialism

As raised [in previous issues of the Socialist](#), we are currently under threat of eviction from our national offices in London. In response we have launched a building fund appeal to help us afford new premises.

As an organisation based on the working class and without rich backers, we have always taken a very serious approach to finance.

Long-time members Val and Terry Pearce have been committed socialists for decades and well remember fund-raising campaigns from the past.

Val says: "We met in the Putney Young Socialists in 1963 and for many years we worked hard in our pursuit of bringing about a socialist society."

They eventually became Militant (forerunner to the Socialist) supporters in 1974 after which they say the Labour Party meetings took on a new purpose - to win workers and youth to a clear socialist programme.

Emergency appeal

In 1975 they were asked to help raise money to replace the press and equipment destroyed in a fire. In only one month Militant was back in production and by the end of year enough had been raised for a new national centre at Mentmore Terrace.

"So many comrades felt a pride in what was achieved. The increasing size of our paper on the new press was obtained by the hard work and commitment of comrades up and down the country alongside an increasing readership," says Val.

"Even the name 'Mentmore Terrace' brings back warm memories of comradeship," remembers Terry. "Going to the centre made you realise that our work locally was of great value nationally in assisting the many working class struggles taking place."

Val explains: "When a new building fund was launched in October 1983 everyone understood the need for larger, safer premises, and we raised enough to move to Hepscott Road".

We had huge support from the wider working class and also the most dedicated members whose financial sacrifice was linked to understanding what was needed in the fight for socialism.

We stand on the shoulders of all those who have gone before. The fight for a socialist society continues and so does the Socialist Party. Help us in that struggle - donate to our building fund.

- [Click here to make a donation online now](#) - put "building fund" in the comments
-

Why I joined: 'The Socialist Party is at the forefront of defending Corbyn's anti-austerity leadership'

Roald Holt, Plymouth Socialist Party

I, like many others, joined the Labour Party after [Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader](#). Enthralled by the idea that Labour might finally return to its socialist roots, I became politically active for the first time in my life.

Some have claimed that [the legacy of New Labour](#) has been entirely vanquished following the rise of Corbyn.

However, personal experience as a member of Labour in the two years since his election revealed that many of those in control of the party machinery still do not represent ordinary working people.

It is difficult to accept the pretence of a unified Labour. Corbyn's movement has strong grassroots support, has the backing of unions and has mobilised and enthused tens of thousands of people making Labour the largest political party in Western Europe.

Victory in two leadership elections and a [bid by MPs to unseat him](#) clearly distinguishes the Blairites from the influx of working class and young people inspired by the 2015 leadership election.

Labour councils, [still bastions of Labour's right](#), push through so-called regeneration schemes which see low-income tenants left in the lurch in what amounts to social cleansing.

This brutal attack against working people only further demonstrates a detachment from the everyday struggles people face.

The Socialist Party has presented great opportunities to stand up and fight on the key issues that we face.

I am proud to be part of an organisation where I am valued as a member and that has been consistently at the forefront in defending Corbyn's anti-austerity leadership and in pushing for the radical transformation of society.

Hands Off HRI campaign granted judicial review into hospital closure

Hands Off HRI campaign

Hands Off HRI made legal history at Leeds Crown Court on 15 March. Judge Mark Gosnall agreed there were important matters of law which must be [tested in a full judicial review](#). We expect the hearing to take place in June.

The hospital trust has so far considered itself to be beyond reproach but they will now have to account for their proposals in court.

This is a huge blow to the trust and a massive victory for [the people of Huddersfield who have stood shoulder to shoulder with this campaign](#). It has taken two years of hard work and perseverance to pull this off but we have been rewarded.

The judge has approved the referral to the high court on the following grounds:

- A serious matter of public law needs to be tested
- Consideration of the consultation exercise
- Examination of alternative community care provision
- Potential breach of equality law
- Lack of travel and transport provision

Our campaign group will now be shifting up a gear to ensure all possible approaches are explored to win this legal case. Of course we still await the outcome of the independent reconfiguration panel which is now with the secretary of state but undoubtedly this legal case will focus his mind!

This challenge has local and national consequences. It is the first serious legal challenge of its kind. If we win, it doesn't just help our hospital, it will give encouragement to all campaign groups fighting for their own services. However we will need ongoing public support.

We estimate we need to raise another £10,000 to bring our legal case and that is where you come in. All supporters can help us in our next phase of fund raising. We have now proved this is not a done deal and that people power can work. Organise your own fundraiser or just donate to our legal fund. This is a fight for Huddersfield and the wider NHS and we can win. Let's do this together.

- You can donate directly by bank transfer to the Hands Off HRI account: sort code 20-43-04, account number 93119130

Over 1,000 on Newcastle NHS march

Over 1,000 socialists, trade unionists, NHS campaigners and supporters assembled to march through the streets of Newcastle on 10 March under the banner of 'Our NHS: no cuts, no closures - no privatisation'. Called by local Keep Our NHS Public groups and local NHS campaigns such as Save South Tyneside Hospital and Save North Tyneside NHS, Socialist Party member and NHS worker William Jarrett was warmly received by the crowd when speaking at the rally, especially when describing the [necessity of strike action to defend NHS pay and services](#).

Ryan Holmes, Newcastle Socialist Party

Refugee Rights to be launched in Manchester

The fight for refugee rights has always been relevant but it has been particularly acute since the start of [the latest refugee crisis](#) in 2015, caused by the [failure of successive European governments](#) to take any responsibility for those fleeing war and devastation.

Extremely vulnerable members of our society are being denied their rights as a result of Theresa May's active creation of a 'hostile environment' for refugees and migrants.

The [Refugee Rights campaign](#) is different to others because of our focus on the trade union movement. This is so important for cutting across far-right anti-immigrant sentiment.

We have been in contact with several refugee organisations and trade union branches and have already received some enthusiastic support for the campaign. Please get in touch if you are in Manchester and would like to get involved!

Bridget Taylor, Manchester Socialist Party

Obituary: Stephen Hawking, 1942-2018

Revolutionary physicist and champion of social causes

Pete Mason, East London Socialist Party

Before Stephen Hawking wrote 'A Brief History of Time', few scientists had attempted to bring to the ordinary reader such a detailed and complex introduction to the universe emerging in front of scientists' frankly astonished eyes.

In this book, which sold more than ten million copies and was translated into 35 languages, the reader felt Hawking personally granted public access to an inaccessible world.

An intimate sense of confidence in the reader, a lack of that condescension that oozed from some of the available popular science programmes and books which often hid behind a veil of frustrating metaphors - it was firstly this accessibility that gave Hawking a position of respect among such wide layers of the public. He appeared on many TV shows, like the Big Bang Theory and of course The Simpsons.

Hawking's contribution to the scientific revolution that was gathering at the time in 1988 arose from his remarkable combination of the world's two most powerful and yet most esoteric theories of the universe.

Both Einstein's general relativity and quantum mechanics were notoriously difficult subjects. One is focused at the subatomic level, the other at the grandest scales of the universe.

Hawking was the first to master both disciplines and win new insights from the study of black holes.

At the time, the idea that time could have a 'history' - that it was a material thing, not some abstract entity as Newton, following the idealist Plato, had believed - was mind-blowing. And that therefore the universe itself had an evolving history beginning with the Big Bang, instead of existing for all time, was highly controversial.

But in 1992, the 'smoking gun' cosmic background radiation was finally confirmed. Cosmologists breathed a sigh of relief and the Big Bang theory became front page news.

Hawking's popularity was enhanced because he championed many important social issues. In 2005, "Britain's most famous scientist, Stephen Hawking, condemned [the US-led invasion of Iraq](#) as a 'war crime' and said it was based on lies."

More recently, his understanding of events failed his former radicalism. On Jeremy Corbyn, he granted "his heart is in the right place and many of his policies are sound," but sadly called on him to step down.

And he backed Remain in the EU referendum, stemming from an understandable fear of attacks on science under Tory rule - [attacks which the neoliberal EU has aided](#) rather than held back.

But he was nonetheless an outspoken critic of capitalism.

"Everyone can enjoy a life of luxury if the machine-produced wealth is shared, or most people can end up miserably poor if the machine-owners successfully lobby against wealth redistribution." Socialists would add that the way to guarantee this is to [take the wealth and machines out of the hands of the capitalists](#).

Hawking opposed privatisation. He supported the struggle for national liberation in Palestine.

And, suffering from devastating motor neurone disease and given just two years to live at the age of 21, he repeatedly defended the health service. Most famously when US newspaper Investor's Business Daily said Hawking "wouldn't have a chance" in Britain in the care of the NHS.

Hawking's robust response has been used ever since by those campaigning for a fully funded public health service: "I wouldn't be here today if it were not for the NHS."

The Socialist inbox

Do you have something to say?

Send your news, views and criticism in not more than 150 words to Socialist Postbox, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, phone 020 8988 8771 or email editors@socialistparty.org.uk.

We reserve the right to shorten and edit letters. Don't forget to give your name, address and phone number. Confidentiality will be respected if requested.

Views of letter writers do not necessarily match those of the Socialist Party.

Featured letter: Corbyn's customs union

I agree with much written in the editorial of the Socialist issue 984, '[Corbyn's customs union dividing line: now stand firm for pro-worker Brexit](#)'.

What Corbyn is posing is a customs union that works for workers, and it has put May on the back foot.

However, as the quoted right-wing Labour MP Frank Field makes clear, the EU will not want to allow it on those terms.

The editorial could have been clearer in stating that the only way Corbyn is going to achieve his terms is by leading a mass movement and linking up with workers across Europe.

Any socialist government would at first have to make trade agreements with individual capitalist countries, potentially including a sort of customs union depending on the global situation.

Capitalist governments wouldn't want to enter favourable trade agreements, of course. Their intention would be to snuff out a socialist government.

But depending on the response of workers in other countries, those governments may not be in a position to force damaging terms.

They may even be forced into some sort of arrangement with a socialist government which could boost the workers' movement.

Solidarity with Chris

Chris Fernandez was TUSC agent in the 2016 Derby City Council elections. He was given an [unjustified and vindictive sentence of 15 months' imprisonment](#) after being found guilty of 'electoral fraud'.

I visited him at Nottingham prison earlier this month. He has had difficulty getting the Socialist as it was not on the "approved list"! But he protested and will be receiving it.

Chris is staying strong but is currently confined to his cell for about 22 hours a day. He looks forward to letters from supporters.

He has moved to E wing at Nottingham prison, so his new address is below. If people want a reply please enclose a stamped addressed envelope.

- Chris Fernandez (21-12-1957), A5447ED, E wing, HMP Nottingham, 112 Perry Road, Sherwood, Nottingham NG5 3AG

Pete Watson, Nottingham

Nerve agents...

The usual Blairite suspects - Yvette Cooper, Hilary Benn, Ben Bradshaw, Pat McFadden and Chris Bryant - were part of the gang who offered their support to [Theresa May's jingoistic stance on Putin's Russia](#), while lining up to yet again plunge the dagger into Jeremy's back. May gushingly thanked Cooper for her support.

Jeremy's crime? He suggested a little more evidence should be available before drawing the conclusion that Putin - plunderer of state-owned Russian resources, and friend of the Russian oligarchs who contribute to the Tory party - should be found guilty.

The howls of outrage from the right wing are similar to the attacks on those who dared to [question the decision to invade Iraq](#).

Remember Jack Straw's slur? We were appeasers comparable to those who sold out Czechoslovakia to Hitler at Munich in 1938.

The whole world now stands aghast at the turmoil in the Middle East which was triggered by the catastrophic decision to support the warmonger in the White House and invade Iraq.

Socialists don't need any lessons about Putin's gangster state from the Tories who celebrated the avalanche of privatisation and plunder of state resources which followed the collapse of Stalinism. The Russian working class were reduced to dire poverty as a result.

Some Corbyn supporters argue that mandatory reselection is not necessary as the Parliamentary Labour Party now accepts his leadership. This stance of the Blairite MPs again makes nonsense of that contention.

Tony Mulhearn, Liverpool

... Blairite agents

Labour's Blairites are, of course, hypocrites of the highest order. Their embrace of capitalism means they always end up putting big business before human life, whether the business interests are British or Russian.

Take, for instance, arch-Blairite Lord Mandelson, who is the chairman of the strategic advisory firm Global Counsel.

Last week the Financial Times reported his group had just "won a contract to advise" Russian energy company En+, which it said was owned by "Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska."

It also noted how former Tory climate change minister Greg Barker had recently been appointed as En+ chairman.

Here you might observe that the former chief operating officer for En+, Vladimir Polin, is presently the senior vice president of operations for the mining company Polyus Gold.

Until recently a long-serving board member of this Russian mining company was the immensely influential Tory fundraiser Patrick Meade, 8th Earl of Clanwilliam.

Meade is an aristocrat who also hobnobs as an advisor to Oracle Capital Group, where he has worked alongside Blairite hero David Blunkett - now Lord Blunkett - and Roger Munnings.

Munnings is a gentlemen who refers to Putin as a "hero," and is employed as chairman of the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce and a leading board member of Mandelson's old haunt, the Russian investment firm Sistema.

Such ruling class powerbrokers, whether they be Tories or Blairites, represent an entirely different type of politics to that of Jeremy Corbyn.

Unless Corbyn prioritises [reforms that can transform the Labour Party into a democratic, working class organisation](#) - completely committed to fighting for the needs of the many - his programme will most likely remain unrealised, even if a Corbyn-led government comes to power.

Mike Barker, Leicester

Thatcherite striker?

The strike in universities might have won over a surprising late convert to trade unionism.

In the 1980s Patrick Minford served as Thatcher's economic adviser as she ripped up the rights of trade unions and embarked on a privatisation spree that damaged British capitalism's economic strength and exposed our public services to profiteering private companies.

But pickets at the Business School at Cardiff University, at which Minford is a professor, have been wondering why, unlike in previous strikes, Minford hasn't been seen crossing the picket line.

Strikers say he'd come in to work even on his day off just to theatrically break the strike.

[Just like universities across the country](#), at Cardiff there are more pickets, with more people on them, than any strike in living memory - and the daily strike rallies are bigger than ever too. Could even Patrick Minford be a silent supporter?

Ross Saunders, Cardiff

Saudi sweetener

Having rolled out the red carpet for Saudi despot Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on his recent UK visit, Prime Minister Theresa May staunchly defended [his regime's human rights record](#) when criticised by Jeremy Corbyn in parliament.

Only cynics would say May's defence of the House of Saud is to do with securing more lucrative deals for British capitalists - arms sales to Saudi Arabia since the start of the devastating war in Yemen in 2015 have amounted to \$6.4 billion.

But May's attempt to defend the indefensible is curious. She maintained that Saudi cooperation with the British state had "saved the lives of potentially hundreds of people in this country."

However, this 'fact' doesn't hold up to scrutiny - not least because many global jihadist organisations, which have killed hundreds of British citizens, derive their ideology from the reactionary Wahhabi movement in Islam, based in Saudi Arabia.

The absolute monarchy of the House of Saud has always coexisted with fanatical Wahhabism, despite the Saudi ruling clique's penchant for 'western decadence' and notwithstanding bin Salman's recent public criticism of 'Islamic extremism'.

The Saudi state has spent over \$100 billion of its petrodollars exporting Wahhabism globally over the last 30 years, as estimated by the 2008 Channel 4 documentary *The Qur'an*, including financing groups such as al-Qa'ida, al-Nusra and the Taliban.

I wonder if the queen mentioned this over tea with the crown prince?

Simon Carter, Forest Gate, east London

Chartist uprising

In an essay in BBC History Magazine in March to accompany Radio 4's series 'British Socialism: The Grand Tour', historian Jon Lawrence charts the formation of the Labour Party and its roots in 19th working class movements including Chartism.

In the article Lawrence gets a few things wrong. This includes his claim that Chartism, the world's first working class movement, which demanded votes for all men over 21 and working class political representation, was purely interested in "incorporation into the political order, rather than destruction of that order" and that "Marx and Engels misread Chartism."

Maybe he's never heard of the [Chartist rising in Newport in 1839](#), one of Britain's last large-scale armed rebellions against the political order. 7,500 Chartists and workers marched on the city.

Among their intentions was to seize power in Newport, Cardiff, Abergavenny and Brecon, declare a "Silurian" workers' republic, and appeal for support from workers in England and Scotland.

Workers' militias had been formed and drilled under the bosses' noses. A rough economic programme was discussed, including taking over the mines, iron works and banks.

And preparations were also made in London, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Newcastle, Birmingham, the West Country and Dundee - anticipating joining the insurrection.

Unfortunately the rising ended in bloody failure after the marchers lost the element of surprise and found troops waiting for them at the Westgate Hotel.

But the event shows that, although there were some in the Chartist movement who wanted "incorporation," the rank and file wanted to go much further.

Frank Allen, Loughton

Audio version of this document

[To hear an audio version of this document click here.](#)

What the Socialist Party stands for

The Socialist Party fights for socialism – a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profits of a few. We also oppose every cut, fighting in our day-to-day campaigning for every possible improvement for working class people.

The organised working class has the potential power to stop the cuts and transform society.

As capitalism dominates the globe, the struggle for genuine socialism must be international.

The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), a socialist international that organises in over 40 countries.

Our demands include:

Public services

- No to ALL cuts in jobs, public services and benefits. Defend our pensions.
- No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.
- Fully fund all services and run them under accountable, democratic committees that include representatives of service workers and users.
- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees now and introduce a living grant. No to academies and 'free schools'!
- A socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs - free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out private contractors!
- Keep council housing publicly owned. For a massive building programme of publicly owned housing, on an environmentally sustainable basis, to provide good quality homes with low rents.

Work and income

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to £10 an hour without exemptions as an immediate step towards a real living wage. For an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings.
- All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one of employment.
- An immediate 50% increase in the state retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension.
- Reject 'workfare'. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.
- Scrap the anti-trade union laws! For fighting trade unions, democratically controlled by their members. Full-time union officials to be regularly elected and receive no more than a worker's wage. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

Environment

- Major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy and into ending the problems of early obsolescence and unrecycled waste.
- Public ownership of the energy generating industries. No to nuclear power. No to Trident.

- A democratically planned, low-fare, publicly-owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.

Rights

- Oppose discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice.
- Repeal all laws that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest! End police harassment.
- Defend abortion rights. For a woman's right to choose when and whether to have children.
- For the right to asylum. No to racist immigration laws.
- For the right to vote at 16.

Mass workers' party

- For a mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.
- Fight for Labour to be transformed into such a party: deselect the Blairites!

Socialism and internationalism

- No to imperialist wars and occupations.
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.
- No to the bosses' neoliberal European Union and single market. For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!

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