

thesocialistpostbag

Do you have something to say?

Send your news, views and criticism in not more than 150 words to Socialist Postbag, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, or phone 020 8988 8771, email: editors@socialistparty.org.uk. We reserve the right to shorten letters. Don't forget to give your name, address and phone number. Confidentiality will be respected if requested.

New generation of union leaders?



I am a London bus driver. Like many other Unite activists, I'm relieved and delighted that Len McCluskey has been elected to be our new leader. The low 16% turnout in the ballot says how much work we've got to really involve most workers in Britain's biggest union.

Len's interview in The Socialist marks an encouraging start. Len spoke against the cuts proposed by all three main parties. "We need to arm our members and members of the general public so that they understand there is an alternative." He offered support to youth and workers in struggle.

Len McCluskey knows we don't always agree, but let's hope this shows that a new generation of leaders in the bigger unions is catching up with some of the smaller ones, like PCS and RMT. Good interview.

Andy Beadle

Awash with cash

The world's biggest companies are awash with cash according to a Financial Times report at the end of November. The report quotes the McKinsey Global Institute as saying: "Companies are uncertain about where the world is going. Until they are, they don't want to pay the money out" (in dividends).

Nor do they want to invest it! The total earnings of the biggest 1,500 companies in the world (those comprising the MSCI stock market Index) are running at \$3 trillion a year. According to the FT, this money, "remains stuck inside companies".

Bob Severn

Walthamstow Socialist Party

To put that number in perspective - the food import bill for the entire world is expected to top \$1 trillion this year, as food prices rise. The money swilling around in the world's biggest companies could pay this bill three times over.

Steve Appleton

Pots and kettles

The dismal failure of the (England) Football Association bid to host the Men's Football World Cup Finals in 2018 has led to complaints of corruption. Pots and kettles.

If the English game is free of malpractice why are Harry Redknapp, Peter Storrie and Milan Mandaric due to appear in court in the new year to answer charges relating to transfer dealings when they were in charge at Portsmouth? Maybe a small window will be opened onto business practices in 'the best league in the world'?

Being hosts represented England's best chance of qualifying, as despite 'inventing the game', playing standards in England have stagnated or regressed. This is demonstrated by the poor quality of coaching - one qualified coach for every 800 players compared with one for every 17 players in Spain. The decline in facilities is also stark across the country. In Islington, an area of nearly 200,000 people, there is only one grass pitch and this is reserved for elite competition.

David Maples

School student protests

In the Guardian Weekend magazine Lucy Mangan, referring to this year's student and school student protests, said how it was a shame that she and her school friends did not do similar in the 1980s.

However, there were student protests during Thatcher's reign. 250,000 school students went on strike in 1985 against the hated youth training schemes (YTS). The YTS used young people for cheap labour, who would then be thrown on the scrapheap at the end of the scheme.

These protests, organised by the Militant-led Labour Party Young Socialists, resulted in compulsory YTS being scrapped, showing that the current government can also be defeated.

Bob Severn

Walthamstow Socialist Party

TV documentary

Battle for Barking

a review by Naomi Byron



Members of Day-Mer Turkish and Kurdish youth movement on the Youth Fight for Jobs March in Barking.

photo Paul Mattsson

DESPITE THE crushing electoral defeat for the British National Party (BNP) in May 2010, and the internal struggles it caused them, the discontent and anger they were exploiting still exist in Barking. This documentary clearly shows that many working-class people in Barking feel that Labour no longer understands or represents them.

It's a good introduction to why a far right, racist group like the BNP has been able to build support. The tragedy of the BNP supporter whose son died in Afghanistan, fighting in a war his father didn't support, brought home the failure of Labour's policies in a deeply personal way. The BNP quickly exploited his grief, asking him to be part of their election broadcast.

The Labour Party's total inability to adopt pro-working-class policies to create a positive alternative to the racist, far-right BNP comes across clearly. This left Margaret Hodge's campaign at a severe disadvantage, with her strongest argument being that voters should "hold their noses and vote for me to keep the BNP out".

The footage of Hodge wearing Jimmy Choo shoes at a building site for a photo-opportunity about a few new houses being built by Labour summed her up.

The documentary concentrated on the personal and unfortunately didn't show the true colours of either Hodge or the BNP. Hodge came across as a well-meaning liberal who hated racism, but she has been prepared to whip up racism and anti-immigrant prejudice to win votes back from the BNP and save her parliamentary career.

Three months before the election, Hodge wrote an article in the Daily Mail calling for migrants to "earn" the rights to benefits and council housing - as if most migrants were given these things automatically on arrival at the airport.

A few facts like this, or about Labour's record at scapegoating migrants for their own failures in government, would put Hodge's complaint that every issue "is seen through the prism of immigration" in context!

One BNP canvasser in The Battle for Barking says "most of us who were in the party, we're ex-Labour members and ex-Labour supporters, we just believe that the party's left us behind." But, faced with a voter who refuses to consider voting BNP because they are "Nazis", the canvasser dismisses this as "nonsense".

Similarly to Hodge's actual record, none of the BNP's Neo-Nazi links, ideas or history are really discussed. It's almost as if the word "Nazi" is

just an insult without real meaning thrown by both sides at each other. The documentary let people present themselves as they choose without real challenge, so the BNP's rich backers and their anti-working-class, divisive policies were not discussed.

It also reflects the de-politicisation of the anti-BNP campaign by Hodge, the Labour Party and groups like Unite Against Fascism (UAF) who would not criticise Hodge or the Labour Party publicly for their role in opening the door to the BNP.

This allowed the BNP more support than they would have got if a more radical campaign, promoting a real left alternative locally, had developed in time. A march through Barking during the election organised by Youth Fight for Jobs, demanding work on a living wage and free education, got an excellent response.

Fortunately, as the documentary shows, the BNP got plenty of opposition from both voters and local youth. But until a new party of the working class is built, the door remains wide open to the far right. Anti-cuts, trade union and socialist candidates standing in next year's local elections can help towards building this party!

* Available on More Four On Demand

Don't let profit become the bottom line in care

FOLLOWING A BBC South 'Inside Out' programme in October that showed the moment in January 2009 when a nurse switched off a ventilator that led to a disabled man being permanently brain-damaged, film of the incident went 'viral' on the internet.

A Unison member

The victim, Jamie Merrett, a former plumber who was paralysed in a car accident in 2002, received care at his home in Devizes, Wiltshire which was funded by his local primary care trust. Before the 2009 incident Jamie used a ventilator both day and night, but like many who are tetraplegic he lived independently, operated an electric wheelchair on his own, and used a computer.

Media reports painted his personal situation partially in tragic tones. But examples, such as the writer and academic Mike Oliver and BBC radio producer and New Statesman blogger Victoria Brignell, illustrate that tetraplegia itself is not a barrier to a full and varied life.

Rather it is social factors such as access to personal assistance or care workers, accessible housing and transport, high-quality health services and comfortable living conditions that are key. The tragedy of Jamie's situation is that a lack of support was not a factor, but rather the way it was delivered.

Because of his concerns, Jamie had set up a camera above his bed to record how he was being cared for. After his ventilator was switched off, the BBC film showed the nurse and a second care worker panicking as they did not know how to restart

it. The nurse tried to manually resuscitate Jamie using an Ambu bag, but failed to connect it to his tracheotomy. 21 minutes later, paramedics restarted the ventilator.

As someone who uses ventilation at night, I am aware of how critical it is that my helpers do not alter the settings on my ventilator. I am fortunate that the health element of my support is delivered through my local authority care package so I am able to use the same personal assistants all the time.

They are therefore familiar with the various pieces of equipment I use, and follow my instructions and respect my approach to personal care matters.

In Jamie Merrett's case, he used agency staff from Ambition 24hours. The assumption is that agency staff have the skills to follow a care plan and use any equipment. The fact that

both the nurse and care assistant could not restart the ventilator demonstrates this assumption is wrong. Equipment and personal care routines differ from person to person. Therefore training and shadowing should be carried out first.

But the resources are simply not available to do this for agency based care packages that already cost in excess of £90,000-£100,000 a year.

For many years I have used the British Nursing Agency (BNA) for cover when my personal assistants are on holiday or are sick. Recently I rang my local office to find I was speaking to someone based in South Africa. BNA had been taken over by the A24 Group and its administrative operations merged with Ambition24hours. The local BNA office had closed.

Whilst the South African staff are always friendly and diligent, work-

ers in a local office get to know both their staff and disabled clients over time, and understand which workers are the best match for particular disabled people.

In a globalised world where capitalist companies are looking to cut costs, moving administrative functions abroad to countries where labour costs are much lower makes sense to them. Profit is the bottom line. If this can happen with an agency, it is easy to imagine how the administrative side of local authority social services could go the same way.

Jamie Merritt understood straight away the gravity of his situation and made clicking sounds through his face mask to warn the nurse and care assistant.

For severely disabled people, small mistakes can be catastrophic as the impact on Jamie shows.