

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.

'Difficult' decisions

Life can be so hard, can't it? 'Difficult' decisions about where to slash, 'tough' decisions about what needs burning. People don't realise how hard it is being a Con-Dem.

The Lib-Dems, of course, have had a particularly painful time, with TV journalists constantly asking them if it's been a 'difficult decision' to abstain, or support the government on £9,000 a year tuition fees.

'Yes, it's been a very difficult decision. I've had to consult my constituents, I've had to discuss it with colleagues, I've had representations from students, etc, etc'. Simon Hughes looked and sounded so bad on Newsnight that Emily Maitlis called him a 'tortured soul'.

We could spare them all - and the world - much pain and suffering if we just had some socialist or TUSC MPs, who, when asked if it was a 'difficult decision', would say: 'No, it was very easy, I was elected to defend the interests of the working class and young people, so that's how I voted - against. It was really easy. Thanks and goodnight.'

Paul Gerrard

Dropped commitments

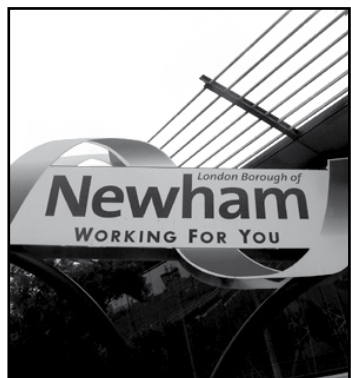
The Bradford Lib-Dem MP, David Ward, appeared on BBC Radio Leeds the day after the fees vote, justifying breaking his election pledge. He pointed to other manifesto promises, like the 'mansion tax', that the Lib Dems had to drop. Couldn't the Con-Dem government have used the revenue from the mansion tax to avoid raising tuition fees? During the coalition negotiations why did the Lib-Dems drop policies that taxed the rich, but adopt policies that screw the poor?

Ian Pattison, Socialist Students national chair

Buck-passing mayors

Newham's mayor, Sir Robin Wales, a die-hard Blairite fundamentalist, is in belligerent mood. He wants to balance the books, he says, and thinks the blame should lie with "the Tories and the yellow Tories". But it is not so easy to pass the buck. In reality, the faded, washed out 'red' Tories in New Labour are in the same boat - if they are not prepared to fight back.

To add insult to injury, Wales recently gave himself a 4% pay rise. On £78,844, he is the highest paid London borough mayor - followed closely by Steve Bullock (Lewisham - £78,835), and Jules Pipe (Hackney - £75,846).



All three are New Labour and their boroughs are among the poorest in London. It's disgusting. These despicable individuals have nothing but contempt for working-class people. They are not fit to hold office.

Manny Thain

Lives threatened

Tim Cutter says in his article (Socialist 650) that local government employers are considering replacing paid council staff with volunteers in places such as sports centres. This reminded me of an incident at my local council-owned gym this week.

I was teasing an instructor who works there, asking him why he had his head stuck in a book instead of working. He told me that he was studying for an exam in cardiorehabilitation (resuscitating people after they've had a heart attack).

How many volunteers would possess such skills? And the new look tight-fisted local authorities are unlikely to pay for people to acquire them. Schemes such as this not only threaten jobs, but possibly lives too.

Clive Walder, Birmingham Socialist Party

Social networking

In recent demonstrations around the country a new wave of youth - college and school students - have entered the world of political activism. I think this is because the internet, especially social networking sites such as Facebook, has proved an effective means of organising students.

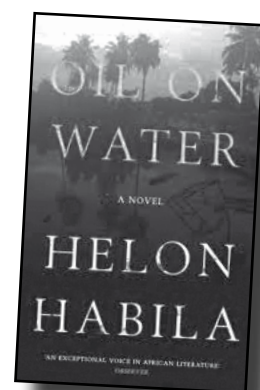
This opens up a new avenue for the distribution of information; not only can party members leaflet on the streets and on stalls etc, but the websites and groups can perhaps provide an accessible means of educating young people about the issues that concern them.

Alex Wortley

Review

Oil on Water

DAVE GORTON reviews *Oil On Water* by Helon Habila, set in the Niger Delta amidst the battle for oil profits and the destruction of the environment.



THIS YEAR, 2010, was the 50th anniversary of Nigeria's independence from imperialist British rule; half a century during which, to quote the Democratic Socialist Movement (the CWI's section in Nigeria): "the super-abundant natural and human resources which Nigeria possesses have never translated into a quality life for its citizens, who still belong to the group of the world's most impoverished and deprived."

92% of Nigerians live on less than \$2 a day. Although Nigeria has roughly 2% of the world's population, the country accounts for 11% of maternal deaths and 12% of the world's under-five mortality rates. Life expectancy has sharply declined with 49 years and 59 years estimated for men and women respectively.

Direct British rule was removed, but as with other former colonial countries, the influence of Western capitalism wasn't. At independence mass reserves of oil in the Niger Delta region had been discovered. They were set to become the resource for super-profits and the accompanying rape of the land and destitution of most of its peoples. The Nigerian state relies for up to 80% of all its income on the exportation of crude oil and natural gas from the Niger Delta.

In 1995, renowned Nigerian author and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was arrested on what were widely suspected to be trumped-up charges and hanged, to wholesale condemnation from most of the world's governments.

Nigeria 'suffered' three years suspension from the British Commonwealth but Shell, the major petroleum company in Nigeria, despite accusations of its involvement, went unpunished. Excavation and exporting of crude oil and gas never stopped for a day. Recent British newspaper articles back up the view that Saro-Wiwa was framed and that Shell was aware of this.

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is set against this murky background. A young journalist's first major report is to come from the delta where he,

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and his now alcoholic journalistic hero, have been sent to find the wife of a British oil company worker, kidnapped by 'militants' who have been active in the region for the last decade.

Habila's storytelling conveys the destruction suffered by the environment and its inhabitants. The feel is of a quagmire, oil-drenched and polluted: "It looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meagre landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth... We walked...our shoes and trousers turning black with oil."

And while Habila's distaste for the representatives of the oil companies and their vicious, sadistic cohorts in the state forces is palpable, he doesn't over-romanticise the 'militants' as freedom fighters. He recognises that many of them have been readily caught up in the web of corruption spun by capitalism in the region.

Oil on Water was probably completed before the 2009 amnesty declared by the government towards

the militants; an amnesty necessitated by declines in profits but one the DSM said at the time couldn't last. The 50th anniversary independence celebrations were marred by two car bombs in Abuja killing ten with one of the Niger Delta 'militant environmental groups' claiming responsibility.

Bombings of oil installations and hostage takings, by trained militia not connected or accountable to ordinary people and their organisations, are not going to defeat the Nigerian state, with its oil multinational allies. This requires a working-class strategy, primarily built around the mobilisation of ordinary Nigerians living in and around the Niger Delta - Nigeria has seen eight general strikes in the last decade.

Helon Habila's book is a reminder of the continued exploitation of the African continent by big business. It is also an excellent piece of literature and definitely worth buying.

• *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila, £12.99 paperback, plus £1.30 p&p, available from Socialist Books. See page 11 advert for contact details.

No more the 'apathetic generation'

ON 20 October I phoned my daughter to nudge her to participate in the London comprehensive spending review protests. She said it was cold, did she have to? I was a little disappointed, but it was her choice.

By a local government worker

When I got home from work she phoned me, saying excitedly that she was on the demo and going off to Downing Street. Both her and her boyfriend came back inspired by the experience and hungry for more.

On 10 November she told me she'd be going on the NUS demo. I expect-

ed a big turnout but not 50,000! She phoned me at work along the course of the demo, describing its size and saying how excited she was.

Later I received a phone call from a friend, saying that she had seen my daughter on TV singing and waving to the camera!

Police brutality

MY DAUGHTER had not seen the police behaviour in the 1984-85 miners' strike or in the Wapping dispute. She never saw police brutality first hand - I had. The friend who phoned me had sustained a head injury from a police truncheon in the 1990s whilst fighting the fascists.

My daughter, her boyfriend and my son were on Facebook, full of their own power and influence on the world.

I felt old telling them to be careful. They have listened to my politics almost since they were born and we've had many a family political squabble round a dinner table. So I was flabbergasted when my 13 year old son asked could he protest on 9 December after speaking to friends on Facebook!

9 December was, I think, the first time my daughter had felt scared. She queued for an hour to get out of Parliament Square only to be told she couldn't leave. She was then pushed onto Westminster Bridge

and kettled for over five hours. She had to say she had an ulcer and start crying to a policeman to be let off the bridge!

Audacity

I BECAME excited by the young people's audacity that night. My local council workplace faces 600 job losses and trade unionists need these young people's élan and raw revolutionary determination. The force they unleashed, linked to the trade union movement could, if not immediately stop, at least force a pause in the pace of job cuts.

The National Shop Stewards Network call to make 11 December

a day of national demonstration would have perfectly complemented everything that has been happening. The TUC's failure to act is an absolute dereliction of duty considering the eruption of anger on Britain's streets and accelerating local government job losses.

There have to be link-ups and a generalisation of the ideas of fightback, of workers and students united.

I'm incredibly proud of my daughter and her friends. Even if at this stage they are perhaps a little naive, they have shown they are not 'the apathetic generation', they are not doormats passively letting their futures be stolen from them.