

HANDS OFF OUR FORESTS!

Stop the Con-Dems' privatisation plans



photos www.handsoffourforest.org

THE TORY MP for the Forest of Dean, Mark Harper, was on the ropes last Friday (4 February) when he finally appeared at a public meeting to face his angry constituents. The last public meeting held in the Forest on the issue of cuts in library and youth services and the proposed sell-off of Forestry Commission land attracted 500 people.

Diane Gash,
Socialist Party and HOOF

Harper failed to attend and weeks later chose to organise a meeting giving only 24-hour's notice, with no public advertisement, in a venue which could hold 150 people. 250 more stood outside the building for two hours in wet and freezing weather waiting to speak to him when he came out.

Harper left by the back door and jumped straight into a police car to be taken away. Just another cowardly demonstration of how little he cares about the views of the people he is elected and paid to represent.

Harper thought that he could pacify the campaigners by telling them that the Forest of Dean, as an Ancient Heritage Forest would be exempted from a sell-off and would

only be considered for handing over to a Charitable Trust.

Lee, a local Socialist Party member, asked him to explain how that would protect the forest from a future sell-off if, as is highly likely in times of such economic crisis, the trust failed. The answer was that the land would go back to the Forestry Commission. The true answer, as everyone knows, is that it would be sold off to the highest bidder.

Sell-off

IN OCTOBER 2010, after the spending review, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced it was selling off 15% of woods managed by the Forestry Commission in England to 'private developers and civil society' but by November this had changed to "a very substantial disposal of public forest estate, which could go to the extent of it all!"

The Public Bodies Bill, (aka a 'loggers' charter') currently being debated in parliament would have huge ranging powers, would override existing regulatory legislation and would allow the government to sell off any public assets it chose.

But 'civil society' doesn't like the idea. A YouGov poll found that 84%

of people asked wanted to keep our forests in public ownership, only 2% did not and so the campaign started.

The Forest of Dean has fought sell-offs before and the local Hands Off Our Forest (HOOF) campaign is highly organised and informed and has massive support. The Forestry Commission union, Unite, works closely with it and is represented on the steering committee. A sell-off or any kind of transfer is a massive threat to their jobs.

No-one is fooled by talk of 'Trusts and Community opportunities', everyone knows a privatisation bid when they see one. A sell-off makes no sense. Initially, the government may make money but in the long run there would not be savings, more likely losses.

Revenue from timber sales would be vastly reduced. According to the Guardian, the government "may have to pay more for woodland grants to private companies and it could lose money if wealthy people buy forests for tax avoidance."

Grants would have to be paid to support the upkeep of Heritage Forests, work currently done by the Commission and paid for by timber sales. Environmentally, it would be a disaster as the Commission would



Hundreds of campaigners against the government's forests sell-off plans wait outside the meeting venue in Coleford to quiz local Tory MP, Mark Harper.

be unable to carry out its research work into the control of tree diseases and manage the natural habitats and leisure pursuits simultaneously as they currently do.

What started here as a local campaign focussing on the unique nature of the Forest of Dean has transformed into a national move-

ment with the local group currently organising a national conference of all HOOF campaign groups to plan coordinated action.

It's good also that a wider mood of resistance is evident and that a new anti-cuts group has been set up with support from Stroud and Gloucester.

whatwestandfor

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

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 democratic, socialist international that organises in over 40 countries.

Our demands include:

Work & Income

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to £8 an hour without exemptions as an immediate step towards £10 an hour. 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 retire-

ment pension, as a step towards a living pension. Reinstatement the link with average earnings now.

- Reject 'Welfare to Work'. 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.
- A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

Public services

- 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!
- 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.

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, sex, 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.

New workers' party

- For a new mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental and anti-war campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.
- Trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party now and aid the building of a new workers' party!

Socialism and Internationalism

- No to imperialist wars and occupations. Withdraw the troops immediately from Iraq and Afghanistan!
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and banks 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' neo-liberal European Union! For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!