

the Socialist postbag

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.

'Duty to provide'

Much of the media reporting on NHS 'reforms' misses one crucial aspect of the Con-Dem plans, which is to remove the legal requirement for the secretary of state to ensure comprehensive health services.

Every NHS Bill since 1946 has contained a clear, unequivocal clause that the government has a 'duty to provide' services. Despite the Con-Dems' claims that they have listened to concerns, the new proposals do not reinstate this duty.

The 'duty to provide' is a linchpin and with its removal the public service nature of the NHS has quietly been removed. These issues are explained in more detail on the website www.dutyto-provide.net where public interest lawyer Peter Roderick describes this change as 'abolishing' one of the NHS' founding principles.

It is crucial that we raise this issue with health unions, at public meetings and in all our campaigns against privatisation and cuts.

Eamann Devlin

The charities Mind and Scope criticised Davies. Disabled Labour MP Anne Begg said his remarks were 'outrageous and unacceptable'. But they failed to point out that Davies is testing both public reaction and the potential outer limits of welfare reform.

The Tory/Liberal coalition's welfare reform bill is close to becoming law. This will lead to many negative changes for disabled people, including replacing Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments, limiting disabled people's entitlement to Contributory Employment and Support Allowance to one year, and a stricter sanctions regime which could mean some claimants losing benefits for three years. Disability organisations and trade unions must reflect the anger expressed by the 8,000 demonstrators on The Hardest Hit march on 11 May. They must oppose the reactionary ideas of Davies and the Tory right and condemn the government's welfare reform bill.

Unison member

Benefit suspended

Kevin Humphrey is a single parent, bringing up two young children, one with special needs. On 9 May, his mother died. An exceptional and harrowing circumstance, but not to the Benefit Agency/DWP decision maker in Worthing who immediately suspended Mr Humphrey's benefit for two weeks from 3-16 June for 'not having good cause' for failing to attend an interview that day.

This meant he has nothing to live on. This from a government which talks about protection of children. This decision wasn't taken on the spur of the moment by a particularly callous individual. The decision was made on 6 June, ie nearly four weeks later (a letter for the 9 May interview didn't even arrive until 11 May). The threat of hunger and poverty is being employed on an increasingly frequent basis in order to strike fear into claimants. Even the death of a parent isn't allowed to interfere with this process.

Tony Greenstein

Brighton Trades Council [Eds] Since this letter was written the Brighton Argus has reported that the DWP has apologised and reinstated Mr Humphrey's benefit.

Constituents? Too much trouble!

Horsforth Against the Cuts (HAC) organised a lobby of local Tory MP Stuart Andrew on 18 June, opposing the Con-Dem coalition's potentially devastating health plans. Over 1,300 signatures, collected on HAC and Socialist Party stalls, were handed to the MP.

An HAC member suggested that as the community has not been consulted, there should be a local referendum to assess his constituents' feelings about the 'reforms' before he continued to support Andrew Lansley's vicious assault on the NHS.

What was Stuart Andrew's response? He said it would not be possible or financially viable for him to find out the opinion of his constituents before removing and altering vital services! No wonder many local people would rather seek information from local activists who support action to save the NHS than from a Tory MP.

Andy Smith
Aireborough & Horsforth

TV review

Sri Lanka's killing fields

Manny Thain

Secretary Tamil Solidarity

Horrible. Heart-rending. Enraging. Those words can barely describe the reaction to the barbaric acts shown in Sri Lanka's Killing Fields, a Channel 4 documentary aired on 14 June.

Although most of the footage has been seen before, Channel 4 has done a great service in bringing it all together. It will help spread awareness of these terrible events and of the movement for Tamil rights and against Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime, which tramples on the rights and conditions of all working class and poor people in Sri Lanka.

It was hard to revisit these events, as Rajapaksa's mass murder machine drove on in 2009 to crush the paramilitary Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its state-within-a-state in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

At the very least, 40,000 people were killed in the conflict's final months. Hundreds of thousands were thrown into open prison camps. This is also a story of the hypocrisy of world powers and their institutions which, directly or indirectly, are complicit in the slaughter.

Genocidal offensive

Over 25 years, the LTTE gained control of the predominantly Tamil-speaking areas. It achieved notoriety for its suicide bombings and tactics of individual terrorism. Given decades of oppression, however, it had secured a level of support in the Tamil population.

Then, in 2008, Rajapaksa launched his genocidal offensive under the cover of the 'war on terror'. By September, Sri Lankan armed forces were moving in on Killinochchi, the LTTE capital.

The United Nations (UN) was told that the safety of its employees in the town could not be guaranteed. People begged UN staff not to leave, fearing a slaughter once they did so. The terrain had been opened up for the offensive, free from prying eyes.

In January 2009, Killinochchi fell. Hundreds of thousands of Tamils fled. They were targeted with heavy artillery, supplied by China, and by Israeli-made combat aircraft. The Campaign Against the Arms Trade says that the British government granted licences for £700,000-worth of military equipment to the regime in 2009, a further £1 million in 2010.

The Sri Lankan armed forces declared a 'no-fire zone', claiming this would safeguard civilians. Yet makeshift hospitals were repeatedly shelled despite their Red Cross markings. Crowded civilian camps



One of the many protests in London against the war and its genocidal conclusion photo Paul Mattsson

and food lines were hit. Aid was cut off. Allegations persist against the LTTE that it used civilians as human shields and killed Tamils to stop them leaving.

On 12 May, the Tamils' mobile phone images ended abruptly. Subsequent recordings came from Sri Lankan troops. They ran riot, gleefully recording the summary execution of naked prisoners, blindfolded, hands tied, shot in the back of the head.

The Channel 4 documentary also includes new photographic evidence of the execution of men and women on 15 May 2009, and other incidents too numerous and grotesque to mention. The rape of women who had surrendered was commonplace. The abuse was absolutely barbaric. It was systematic.

The film ends by stating that Tamil-speaking people are looking to the 'international community' for justice. It asks: 'Will they be failed again?' The UN's record is not reassuring.

On 23 May 2009, UN general secretary, Ban Ki Moon, went on a 15-minute government-supervised 'tour'. He did not talk with captive Tamils. He seems not to have noticed the sprawling camps or widespread misery.

Rajapaksa's regime rejects all allegations against it, setting up the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission to cover up its actions. Meanwhile, the brutal military clampdown continues in the north

and east.

The conflict has also been used to divide working class and poor people along ethnic lines and intensify their exploitation. Recently a worker was killed in one of the government's Free Trade Zones, areas of super-exploitation, while protesting against IMF-led changes to pensions.

Ban Ki Moon says that the UN does not have the authority to hold an investigation. Ultimately, of course, the UN represents the interests of the major world powers. Sri Lanka's strategic position on important sea lanes, its deepwater ports and cheap labour mean that governments and big business are queuing up to do business with Rajapaksa.

Only mass pressure by Tamil-speaking people and their natural allies in the international workers' movement can keep the spotlight on the barbaric crimes witnessed in 2009 and earlier.

For an inquiry to be free from the influence of the Rajapaksa regime and its international collaborators, it would have to consist of representatives accountable to the working class and poor from all of Sri Lanka's communities, with the assistance of trade union and human rights organisations internationally.

This was called for in a recent resolution, passed at a hearing of the European Parliament, which was co-organised by Tamil Solidarity, for the rights of all workers and oppressed people.

See www.tamilsolidarity.org

Comment: apprentice sexists

Alan Sugar and his hopefuls are back again, in a dog eat dog competition to be his next 'apprentice'. Participants are drilled in big business methods, exploiting others as much as possible and stabbing one another in the back.

This week's task involved creating a free magazine, and selling advertising space. One team wanted a patronising magazine aimed at older people (insensitively named 'Hip Replacement') while the winning team decided to produce what

they call a 'classy lad's mag'.

Despite its name -'Covered' - the team leader consistently argued for more pictures of women, as uncovered as possible. Arguments such as 'sex sells' convinced other team members that a magazine presenting women's bodies as objects for sale was necessary to sell advertising space.

In the end, this argument was apparently proved correct. Top advertising executives 'loved it' and bought hundreds of thousands of

pounds worth of ad space in the magazine.

It showed how big business seeks to use the female body to make money. This contributes to the sexist attitudes which say that a woman's body is more important than her mind.

Disgracefully the BBC thinks a show like The Apprentice, actively putting forward right-wing, bigoted, anti-worker politics week in week out is harmless fun.

Claire Laker-Mansfield



photo Paul Mattsson

Wage threat to disabled

Philip Davies, right wing Tory MP for Shipley, West Yorkshire, suggested in Parliament last week that disabled people should be paid less than the minimum wage so they can get a job when competing with non-disabled people. Davies' comments are not new. In 2009, he called for the abolition of the minimum wage for those with criminal convictions and mental health needs.