

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.

Work Programme: who gains

I am currently receiving Jobseeker's Allowance, and have just been given information about going on the Work Programme. I was interested to see your recent article about how job seekers who have been supplied by A4e, are doing warden jobs on behalf of Finsbury Park Business Forum. I believe that the Work Programme was set up to supply labour to councils and other organisations who have made people redundant. The Work Programme is "cost neutral" ie the money from benefit savings is being ploughed back into the Work Programme. That is why, since the Conservatives came to power, the number of claimants who have been put on sanctions has gone up by 40%, this money is then given to the providers of the Work Programme. Who is to say that the likes of A4e won't try to make a claimant's life very difficult while they are on the Work Programme, which then results in that claimant leaving the Programme and subsequently being put on a sanction. After all the money will come back to these big firms!

William Mcloughlin

Cuddly bosses?

Having recently retired and received a 'lump sum' I've a savings account with the Nationwide. Apparently that makes me a member of a nice, cuddly building society (not one of those nasty banks). So they sent me papers for July's AGM meeting - interesting reading. There were many ways to vote. I could vote 'securely' online, pop into a local branch and vote, post my ballot paper in, or attend the AGM. Funny how trade unionists voting on strike action only get one 'choice', a postal ballot or nothing. What percentage of members vote in Nationwide's ballot? Perhaps I'll get a letter to tell me afterwards. I was struck by the CVs of candidates for the board: the deputy chair used to be a director at Lehmann Brothers (does he really want that on his CV?), another executive director held 'a number of senior executive roles at Barclays', another had sat on the Royal Bank of Scotland executive committee, another had been a director of Visa. More like 'big cats than cosy 'pussy cats'.. Their 'remuneration' showed we were dealing with some very fat 'cats' indeed. Chief executive Graham Beale receives total benefits for 2011 of £1,884,000. The six directors will net £6,633,000 between them. Beale's pension allowance is £101,000. We don't know what that will bring him in retirement but it sounds pretty gold-plated to me, rather more than the average £10,000 a year for teachers and £4,000 for civil servants on strike this week. As for the AGM, these building society bosses have probably got things sorted - put me down as a non-voter.

Paul Gerrard

Olympic tickets

Living near the Olympic Stadium, I applied for a few tickets. Not the 100 metres final but early heats of some athletics, swimming and cycling events. Like a million other people I've found out I haven't got any tickets - they've got a few £95 tickets left but that's out of my price range. I can cope. It's good to think so many sports fans went to considerable expense and trouble to try to get tickets. But I won't be happy if, when I watch the early heats of the heptathlon on TV, the

stadium isn't full of fans.

Acres of empty seats will only confirm my suspicion that most seats were sold to firms offering corporate hospitality while the rest are mainly in the hands of a selection of 'worthies' who can't be bothered to turn up on what could be a wet Tuesday morning. It's time sports fans took control of these big sporting events out of the hands of the profiteers and blazers.

Margaret Graham

Protesters tax Bono

I'm still a tax-dodging hypocrite

There were protests this year at Glasstonbury though most were quashed by bouncers. To the fore was U2's decision in 2006 to move their tax affairs to the Netherlands.

The Irish Times remarks on U2 singer Bono: "Critics say Bono, a leading anti-poverty campaigner, should pay full taxes in his homeland at a time of major financial difficulty."

It raises the question of the legitimacy of some who, in an industry worth billions of pounds, market aid or protest songs to finance their lifestyle. However it can be an opportunity for trade unions and socialists to revive working class culture, supporting the right to strike and fighting the attacks on the NHS and subsistence welfare benefits.

Pat Atkinson

Unite LE 1111 Campaign Officer (personal capacity)

Academy fighters show way

The teachers' unions, students and parents of Shorefields College, Liverpool are fighting the imposition of academy schools. They are setting an inspiring example of how to fight the insidious marketisation of education.

The Con-Dem and New Labour mantra that academies, 'free from local authority control', will blossom and bring out the best in pupils is totally false. How does replacing elected councils with unelected private companies or, in Shorefields' case, Chester University, extend accountability to the community?

What drives academy enthusiasts? UK-Analyst.com considers private education provider Wey Education a lucrative investment, explaining that the UK market for education is massive. The government currently spends £16.8 billion a year on secondary schools and £15.2 billion on primary schools so "the firm has good opportunities to take advantage of recent changes made by the coalition government which will allow for more private sector involvement in state funded schools." So the private education companies are in it for the profits they can make.

If our Labour leaders, locally and nationally, displayed some of the courage and dedication of the Shorefields campaigners, the Con-Dem alliance's plans could be stopped in their tracks.

Tony Mulhearn
Liverpool

Play review

The Pitmen Painters

The Pitmen Painters is on tour until 1 October

Mark Baker

Lee Hall, creator of Billy Elliot, focuses here on the real experiences of Ashington miners who, through the Workers Education Association (WEA), become celebrated artists in their spare time.

The play's main characters include a fussy, pedantic union bureaucrat; an unemployed young lad; an individual who quotes Karl Marx rigidly in all circumstances and a softly spoken teacher, Robert Lyon, who tries to educate these hardened souls about 'Art'.

Their different class and cultural outlook immediately becomes apparent. However, as the group begins to paint pictures depicting working class life, particularly their own experiences in the mining community, they catch the eye of the "art world" in particular a local heiress, Helen Sutherland.

Their invite to the "great house" brings out the class differences and

Helen attempts to recruit one of them, Oliver Kilbourn, to become a 'professional artist'. For the men, though, mining is a way of life. The class solidarity between them is beyond her comprehension.

The debate about what art is, and how it seems, to working class people is played out here as Lyon explains when presenting "the first exhibition of paintings entirely by working class artists in British history... the only reason we've not seen their like before is not because the working class lack talent, but because no one has given them a paintbrush... You simply have to find the key and unlock all of this creativity."

As war approaches their whole world becomes threatened. The young lad signs up for the front as the only means of escaping the perpetual cycle of unemployment in the north-east of the 1930s.

Kilbourn visits Lyon who reflects "we can make a world where everyone can flourish... if the working classes use their power and their

intelligence and their creativity... but you can't have a rich culture if three-quarters of the people are disenfranchised."

Reunited after the war, the group are full of optimism. A Labour government is pledged to building a National Health Service and a welfare state, including improved access to education for the working class.

This last section is made more poignant by our awareness of all the things this coalition government now seeks to destroy.

The humanity, spirit and resolve of these miners, whose pit eventually closed in 1981, is inspiring. We are also reminded of the removal of the socialist Clause IV from the Labour Party constitution in 1995. Forward to socialism where working class talent like theirs can be truly liberated.

An unforgettable piece of theatre, *The Pitmen Painters* is on tour to various locations around Britain until 1 October. A London run is expected to follow.

Public money into private firms' hands

Richard Owen

If the government was really interested in saving money, it would address the issue of how much they are being charged for goods and services.

I recently spoke to someone within the Department of Transport and the amount of money being handed to the private sector is staggering.

Within the last year their office spent £5,000 on a garden shed that you can get for a couple of hundred quid; and nearly £1,000 on an air compressor, the type you can buy

from any DIY outlet for under £150. To rub salt into the wound it turns out that when it broke they could not fix it as the office had not agreed to a yearly maintenance cover costing another £1,000.

This is on top of the day-to-day costs, for example £110 an hour for a cleaner. The cleaner is on the minimum wage, the rest of the money goes in "admin" charges!

£49.99 went on a pair on safety boots, the same boots you can buy elsewhere for £17; £15 for a box of pens, enough said.

£4 for emergency rain ponchos, the same type you can buy at any festival for £2.50. They cost about

20p each if you order in bulk direct from the manufacturer.

There is a standing joke within the office. The cost of anything to the government will be the real cost of the item trebled and add 50%.

This is a small office in a small department. If this type of overspend is multiplied up to take into account bigger offices and bigger departments, you get some idea of the money private companies are making from the government.

If the government is truly committed to saving public money then they will start by ending these payments to private companies and not by cutting jobs and services.

Obituary: Andy Viner

Hundreds of people were shocked to hear the news that Andy Viner was killed in a car crash on 18 June. Andy was an active trade unionist, working for Aslef, a lifelong socialist supporting Militant (the Socialist Party's predecessor) in the early 1980s. He gave up a job he loved as a train driver to become a key industrial organiser for Militant. Thousands of trade unionists knew Andy, and respected his commitment to the movement.

Brian Ingham, when head of the industrial department, once said to me: "everybody likes Andy as he has no side to him." Andy had no hidden agendas, what you see is what you get; that quality endeared him to people. He went to work as a tube driver after

leaving fulltime work.

After the premature death of his partner Sarah, Andy brought up the two girls, Sarah's daughter Alex and their daughter Kirsty. When they were old enough Andy went back to work getting a job with Aslef, doing what he loved, organising and defending workers.

Andy always stayed friendly with Socialist Party members. The last time he and I talked was on the 26 March TUC demo. We spent an hour walking up Whitehall discussing how to fight the cuts and catching up with news of people we knew. Andy will always be remembered by those who knew him as a good comrade and will be deeply missed by all of us.

Steve Glennon