

## 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.

**Tories' pension lies**

Right-wing commentators used to accuse socialists of wanting to 'level down' everyone to the same, low living standard. This was a lie. Now the government they support is trying to do exactly that, arguing that public sector pensions should fall to the level of the worst private sector schemes. Supporters of capitalism also say it is not fair for private sector workers to pay towards public sector pensions through taxes. But if the amount going to public sector pensions from taxes is reduced the result will be that the government will have more money - to give to the bankers so they can carry on having bonuses.

A private sector worker whose partner works in the public sector won't see their taxes fall, they will just see their partner get a lower pension.

**Pete, Worcester**

**Disgusting treatment**

As a Carmarthenshire school teacher, I am disgusted by the way the council treats its employees. A worker with NNEB qualifications in childcare works with a class of children with a high level of special educational needs. She faces a £4,000 pay cut if she doesn't sign the new pay contract by the end of September. If she signs, the council will cut her pay by £3,000 a year.

NNEB staff say it is like the council is "holding a gun to their heads". Every NNEB at the school has given over 20 years service and each has a difficult, demanding role. I couldn't perform my role without them.

Day in, day out they care for, support, nurture and teach vulnerable children with special needs such as autism, severe language impairments and a variety of learning difficulties.

Carmarthenshire council told all schools they had to cut workers' pay as it "...is a legal requirement to remove the unequal pay". The Equal Pay Act was brought in to ensure women were not underpaid. How does cutting the NNEB's low wage (a job mostly done by women) by around 20%, 'remove the unequal pay'?

This system bails out the banks and billionaires and takes from the people who really keep the country going - the workers.

**A Carmarthenshire NUT member**

**Save our libraries**

Regarding closing the public libraries, which belong to the public. I am a 70 year old socialist. Libraries were opened in very poor areas like the East End of London, where people were too poor even to buy a newspaper, with a book out of the question.

So a way out was to go along to the local library and read and learn. Working class people are very bright, which this terrible regime hates, and they aim to keep us all in the dark about what they are doing to everybody.

'The Big Society' and 'we are all in it together', what a joke! The arrogant Mr Cameron and his band of crooks, how can they know what it's like to be poor, when they own big estates?

The unions must all band together. I think Bob Crow is great with his heart in the right place.

Young and old, we must all unite to bring this wicked regime down.

**Anne Kahn**

**Civil list benefit waste?**

Baroness Flather claims Pakistani and Bangladeshi families are having lots of children in order to claim extra benefit payments. The first female Asian peer (and a very good argument for abolishing the House of Lords) was branded "deeply irresponsible" and "out of touch" following her comments.

However it has come to our notice that a woman living on state benefits, a Mrs Windsor of Buckingham Palace, has had no less than four children in order to increase the amount of civil list benefits.

Despite subsisting on state handouts, Mrs Windsor is rumoured to have massive personal wealth stashed away and is thought to be the richest woman in Europe. I think Baroness Flather could turn her attention on this waste of public money.

**Derek McMillan**

**Attitudes and platitudes**

On 5 September, Radio 4's Today programme hosted a debate in Birmingham town hall on "What Caused the Riots?". Along with several hundred others I attended, where we heard vague platitudes from the 'great and good' on the panel.

Many of these, including Conservative council leader Mike Whitby, echoed Cameron's talk of "moral decline", but the largest applause was saved for a former gang member from east London, who spoke about the real issues of unemployment and poverty affecting the inner cities.

Socialist Party member Clive Walder also got a good response when he contrasted the so-called greed of those caught looting chewing gum to that of bankers and MPs. For some reason this section was edited out of the final broadcast!

**Nick Hart, Birmingham**

**More on socialism please**

I think that the Socialist should dedicate more column inches to what socialism can offer society. While we must provide a Marxist view on today's political and economic situation, particularly for first-time readers, we must use every opportunity to link these issues with an outlook of how a given situation could be better for working people under socialism.

To less politically-conscious people who read the Socialist for the first time, it may be difficult for them to visualise the benefits of such a system. For example, a reduction of the working week with no loss of pay would open countless doors to working class people to participate in running the society in which they live, not to mention recreational and vocational opportunities.

The Socialist is the only newspaper offering a genuine Marxist analysis of today's events and exposing capitalism, but perhaps we should include more of what we envisage under socialism?

**Henry Allen  
Nottingham Socialist Party**

# Poplar 1921 'Better to break the law than break the poor'



Women Poplar councillors on their way to jail, surrounded by thousands of supporters

**Pete Dickenson**

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the struggle of councillors in Poplar, east London, against government cuts. This culminated in their going to prison with the slogan 'better to break the law than to break the poor'.

Their ultimately successful battle was a major inspiration for Liverpool council to take on the Tories in the 1980s and shows the way forward today in fighting against the ConDem government's attacks. Linking all three periods are profound crises of the capitalist system.

Poplar council's main struggle was to gain a reduction of the rates, the forerunner of the council tax, but they also battled for adequate relief for the poor and a decent minimum wage for council workers.

Poplar has always been a poor area. In the 1920s over a quarter of the borough's men worked in transport, mostly casual dockworkers, yet the docks were vulnerable to trade depressions. Unemployment and poverty rose enormously in the economic bust that followed shortly after World War One.

In 1919, socialists won 39 of the 42 seats on Poplar council and consolidated their hold on the 'Board of Guardians' that administered poor relief. The new councillors were not middle class armchair socialists. They included seven dock workers, seven railwaymen and four labourers.

The capitalist press had a fine time sneering at them as 'unfit to govern', but their first year in office saw impressive achievements. Council housebuilding was inaugurated, the electricity supply developed, the library service expanded. Free milk was provided for expectant mothers and babies and measures were taken to reduce the threat of TB. Poplar paid a minimum wage to council workers well above that elsewhere and introduced equal pay for women.

Poplar levied rates on behalf of London County Council (LCC), the Metropolitan Police and other all-London bodies. It also levied its own rates, including part for the Poplar Board of Guardians. Since the Board of Guardians paid all poor relief in the borough, it was paying out far more, due to the rapid rise in unemployment.

Yet wealthy boroughs like Westminster with few unemployed did

not face this problem. In effect, the poorest boroughs were having to pay far more than their share in looking after London's poor.

Campaigns for "equalisation of the rates" in London, to make rich boroughs pay their share, had been going on for decades with no effect on government policy. Poplar faced a choice - to stay within the law and show Labour in power could be "responsible" as Herbert Morrison, Labour mayor of Hackney advocated, or defy the law in order to change it.

Obeying the law would have meant cutting services, pushing rates above what most of the population could pay, or reducing poor relief to a level which would not stop the unemployed and their families starving.

The Poplar councillors wanted to make a protest which 'would force the central authorities to pay attention'. George Lansbury, the Labour group leader, proposed that they should just levy the rate for their own purposes and the Board of Guardians, not for the all-London bodies.

**Mass support**

This strategy was discussed and agreed at mass meetings of the council trade unions, and in every local area. Backed by this mass support, councillors voted to break the law and did so.

The LCC took a writ out to try to force them to change course. Poplar council then used every avenue to delay the writ, even though they had no chance of a court victory. They were playing for time to build the movement and get other councils to support them.

Finally the LCC took proceedings against them for contempt of court. On 29 July 1921, the councillors and 2,000 supporters marched from the town hall to the High Court, under the now famous slogan, 'better to break the law than to break the poor'.

In prison, the councillors soon

made their voices heard. On arrival, Lansbury asked to see the warder's union card. The food was terrible initially, but a campaign led to a big improvement in their conditions.

They also won the right to hold council meetings in Brixton prison, and the women councillors were brought over from Holloway prison specially. Every evening there were demonstrations outside the prison in support of the class-war prisoners.

The government hoped the councillors would compromise. However, Stepney and Bethnal Green councils made moves to follow Poplar. The pressure was such that even Clement Attlee (future Labour prime minister and no radical) then a Stepney councillor, moved the resolution to go down the Poplar road. Poplar also won the TUC's backing.

A formula was eventually accepted that the councillors would apologise for contempt of court, but without agreeing to levy the disputed rates - in other words a crushing victory for the 'law breakers'. A subsequent conference to discuss the issue, organised by the government, accepted nearly all of Poplar's demands.

The rebel Poplar councillors were under no illusions that what they were fighting for was a simple reform. They all saw the ultimate solution for the ending of unemployment in a socialist society.

Today, the present mayor of Tower Hamlets, that includes the Poplar area, invoked the spirit of 'Poplarism' and Lansbury in his election campaign. He then implemented a savage programme of Tory and Liberal cuts (without any resistance) making a mockery of his earlier pronouncements.

If Tower Hamlets followed the Poplar road today, as well as the successful example of the 1980s Liverpool city council struggle, then a campaign could be built that would draw other councils behind it and force the government to retreat.

**London Socialist Party public meeting.  
"How do we fight for a better future?  
Better to break the law than break the poor."  
Thursday 29 September 7.30pm.**

**Room 2.40, Francis Bancroft Building, Queen Mary's university, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS.**

Nearest tubes. Mile End, Stepney Green.

**Speakers include Tony Mulhearn, Liverpool 47 group of councillors,  
Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary.**