

## 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.

**Silence on housing crisis**

A recent report from the unitary North-umberland council (which has a minority Lib Dem administration) showed that there were 2,200 properties in the county that had been empty for six months or more. There is a waiting list of 14,000 people desperate for a home in the area.

My local councillor said that the bulk of the unoccupied property in his ward was in a block of newly built flats that the developers couldn't sell because of the unavailability of mortgages. "Could they not be taken into public ownership?" he asked. He is a Tory!

The response in the local rag from the 2010 Lib Dem parliamentary candidate was: "Any bailouts for private builders would run completely counter to the sane and sustainable economics our county now needs".

And New Labour's contributions, either in the council chamber or the press to these comments? Instead of using an opportunity to put forward a socialist housing policy we got - complete silence!

**Frank Riley, Hexham**

**Workers' representatives?**

I've just read the excellent editorial called 'The trade unions and Labour' in issue 702 of the Socialist. Sadly the good old days of the union leaders having beer and chip butties and bacon sarnies with a Labour PM at Number 10 are long gone.

To make it worse the latest crop of Labour Party leaders appear to be trying to distance themselves from the unions. No doubt this is a feeble attempt by Labour to try and persuade the City that they are not in the pockets of those naughty unions who insist on trying to defend their pay and pensions!

The Labour Party was formed to give the trade unions political representation in parliament, and today the unions provide Labour with 80% of its funding. Perhaps the time has come for trade unionists to take their hard-earned money and start supporting a party or organisation that will give them genuine support and political representation?

**Lin Black, Swansea**

**Bishop moves right**

Lord Carey used to be on the Daily Mail hate list for his support of women priests and his opposition to the persecution of LGBT people. What a difference a day makes. The former Archbishop is now their flavour of the month because he has supported the government's attack on welfare.

Carey is well aware that the poor will suffer under the government's proposals. They put a cap on payments to families. They put no cap on rents and prices. A child of four could work out that the poor will suffer.

It is as easy for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle as it is for a rich man

to enter the kingdom of heaven. It looks as if millionaire Carey has given up on that idea.

**Derek McMillan**

**Rich by name...**

"Don't give up on capitalism," pleads George Osborne in the FT Weekend this week, but we're getting pretty tired of the system's sick jokes. It's starting to feel like they're taking the rise. Barclays Bank distributed £100 million in pay and bonuses to just three people last year. Their names? Bob Diamond, Jerry "the miser" del Missier and Rich Ricci. Time to put an end to this pantomime? I think so.

**Ross Saunders**

**Answer the pub bores!**

Thanks for the new look Socialist. It's great to see the new features introduced over the last few issues. The short and snappy articles are ideal ammo for those of us with limited memory storage capacity to load up before a trip to the pub. It's good to have something short and to the point to throw back at reactionary pub bores!

Them and Us and What We Heard go well alongside the longer articles and all help to make our paper an enjoyable as well as useful and informative read. The logo for Them and Us really illustrates what we are all about. We Shoal Overcome!

**Owen Rogers, Swansea Socialist Party**

**Fuel poverty**

In 2009 a fifth of all households suffered fuel poverty ie they spend at least 10% of their disposable income on domestic heating. Austerity measures such as benefit cuts and pay freezes make this worse. Stretched budgets mean stark choices between keeping warm, a healthy diet, and other necessities such as medication.

The fuel companies act as a cartel, and when one company raises its prices the others follow suit. Their profits are huge - British Gas's rose 24% to £742 million in 2010 while those of parent company Centrica rose 29% to £2.4 billion.

Fuel regulator Ofgem highlights an increase in energy firms' profit margins from £15 a customer in June 2011 to £125 in October 2011. However, all that Energy Secretary Chris Huhne can suggest, despite pledging to "get tough" with the firms, is that consumers make sure they are on the cheapest tariff, switch to direct debit, and to insulate. The cheapest dual-fuel deals, those online, are now over £1,000.

The need to renationalise the domestic energy industry on a sustainable basis could not be clearer.

**Andrew Barber**

# Are the Greens a real alternative?

The Labour party 'opposition' has alienated many trade unionists, including some union leaders, especially over its failure to oppose Tory policies such as wage restraint and cuts. The Green Party leadership has been trying to encourage Labour Party members to support them instead. Alec Price comments.

Green leader Caroline Lucas MP and her party are attempting to build on the unions' rift with Labour to encourage trade union support and funding to break from the Labour Party and support them instead.

Due to the demise of Labour as a mass workers' party over recent decades it is easy to understand how the Greens may appeal to people disgusted by the lack of choice in the three main parties. This included me at one time! But, to decide whether the Greens are a real alternative we must look at how they act in power and decide if this represents a way forward or a dead end.

The Greens have little chance of becoming elected to government in Britain under the present electoral system. But in other countries (with different electoral systems) they have formed governments.

In Ireland the Greens, in coalition in government with the country's main capitalist party Fianna Fáil, passed through Ireland's biggest ever austerity package, including cutting the minimum wage. This led to their electoral wipe-out.

**Green councillors**

The Greens in Britain take no responsibility for their Irish counterparts - perhaps it is unfair to judge them on that? So let's look closer to home... to Green councillors elected to local authorities in Britain.

The leader of the Norfolk Greens, Phillip Hardy, defected to the Tories late last year. The Greens argue that this is one rogue councillor - perhaps it is unfair to judge them on one incident?

Liverpool city council's first budget after the 2010 election cut £91 million - including the axing of 2,000 council and charity jobs, which also hit the services they provide. The two Green councillors formed a coalition with Labour and other parties to draw up the £91million cuts budget. Councillor Sarah Jennings, leader of the Greens, said: "There will be major cuts, we are not



**Caroline Lucas, Green Party leader**

just talking about trimming the fat." The Greens then abstained on their own budget!

Perhaps it's still unfair to judge them. Maybe if they controlled the council they would behave differently? The Greens control Brighton council - getting elected on a platform to fight against the cuts. The council is now committed to cutting the budget by £35 million over two years.

True, some of the Green talk is great and they have some decent members. But what do these deeds say about the Greens as a party in power? Socialists don't bring this up to score points. If we want to build a new mass workers' party then it has to be on a principled basis that would need to include, as an absolute minimum:

\* Opposition to all the cuts in jobs and services - in word and in deed

\* No coalitions with the capitalist parties

\* Rooted in the working class and labour movement i.e. the trade unions and the youth and community campaigns

\* Reject above-inflation increases in tax to compensate for government cuts

\* Oppose the privatisation or outsourcing etc of public services

The Green Party, when it is in power, does not do this. The Labour Party, as we all know, does not do this either and I don't believe that attempts to reclaim it, however well intentioned, will meet with success.

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) is the best available electoral vehicle for trade unions and anti-cuts groups who wish to give a political shape to their fight. Trade unions should follow through their criticism of Labour to its logical conclusion and break the link with Labour - where they haven't done so already.

They then should fund candidates who will represent their aims - this could be alongside funding the few individual anti-cuts Labour MPs or such Labour councillors as Kingsley Abrams (suspended for voting against cuts!). This May's elections would be a good place to start!

## Smacking not the answer

**Jane James**

David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham, has called for the 'smacking ban' to be repealed. He claims his constituents back this, blaming lack of parental control as a factor in last summer's riots - a view also held by Tory London mayor Boris Johnson.

The Socialist Party opposes smacking or harming children in any way and believes that children have rights too. Many parents who hit their children do so when they're stressed, angry or have lost control. Parenting does not come naturally and many parents would welcome advice and classes in how best to bring up their children.

Caring for children can be difficult, so activities bringing parents, children and qualified staff together can help. The Sure Start projects, now cut, did that very well!

When Socialist Party members were campaigning in Tottenham after the riots some parents did say that more discipline was needed for

young people. But people acknowledged the need for more help and support for families

...many parents would welcome advice and classes in how best to bring up their children

Cuts, especially the closure of all Tottenham's youth clubs, played a significant role in the riots. Young people now had nowhere to go which was frustrating for them. So if David Lammy wants to do something positive for his constituents he should join the protest outside Haringey's civic centre on 20 February against huge cuts that will wipe out even more essential services.

**SocialismToday**

The Socialist Party's magazine February 2012 issue includes:

- **Dithering in Durban**
- **Pensions fight continues**
- **'The year of all risks'**



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