

- Editorial of the Socialist issue 1040

Local elections 2019: Time to stand up and fight the cuts!

One primary school in Southampton has stood up and refused to accept any more cuts. A united campaign of staff, parents and governors - including strike action - has resulted in Southampton's Labour council agreeing to guarantee no cuts to the school, which is running a deficit of £850,000 a year - for two years.

This tremendous battle by one primary school, resulting in victory, gives a glimpse of what is possible across the country. It should not have taken strike action to force Southampton Labour council, which has around £100 million in useable reserves, to stop the cuts at Valentine school. But now that the possibilities have been shown, every Labour council in the country should follow the same road.

Across England, 91% of schools are facing funding cuts. Our children's education is being damaged by Tory austerity, but Labour councils could prevent the cuts to schools in their areas by allowing them to run legal licensed deficits. Instead, up and down the country, Labour councils continue to enforce Tory cuts.

Nor do the lessons of Valentine school apply only to education. Local authority services have been cut to the bone and beyond. In the five years from 2010 more than half a million council workers lost their jobs.

As the national housing crisis escalates, councils are increasingly unable to provide even a sticking plaster on the gaping wound of homelessness. Real-terms spending on council housing services has been slashed by 48% over the last decade.

In 2017, 600 people died sleeping rough in England and Wales, as the number of street sleepers rockets. Far more are 'hidden homeless', sofa-surfing and sleeping on friends and families floors.

One in six women's refuges have closed, leading to 1,000 women and children fleeing domestic abuse being turned away in just six months last year.

Even statutory services, which councils are legally required to provide, have not escaped the axe. Adult social care spending has been cut by 10%, meaning that a record one in seven older people now have care needs that are not being met.

The Labour councils implementing these brutal cuts have laid the blame at the feet of the Tory government. It is absolutely true that the Tory government has cynically devolved the responsibility for carrying out cuts to local authorities, slashing the money councils receive from central government.

In doing this, the Tories hope to make Labour carry the odium of wielding the axe. The crime of Labour councils up and down the country is in obeying Tory orders instead of standing up and fighting for their local communities, refusing to implement any more cuts.

Imagine if Labour councils had shown a tenth of the courage of the staff and parents at Valentine's primary school. The 125 Labour-led councils in Scotland, England and Wales have combined budgets of almost £80 billion, giving them potential to act as a serious 'counter-power' to this incredibly weak Tory minority government.

They have a combined £9.3 billion in their general combined reserves. They could take a stand tomorrow and refuse to implement one more cut, using their reserves and borrowing powers to fund services until they were reimbursed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government.

This act alone would transform the political situation in Britain, demonstrating to workers who are angry and disillusioned with all the major parties that Labour was serious about fighting in their interests. The

determination of Valentine school would be matched by millions of workers and service users who would be prepared to take a stand to stop cuts if a lead was given. A Labour landslide victory could then be posed.

Unfortunately, however, the big majority of Labour councillors have a record of supporting austerity, not fighting it. They are on the pro-capitalist wing of the Labour Party that wants to see a return to the Blairite policies of New Labour.

Up until now Jeremy Corbyn and the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, have not made a clear call for Labour councils to stop implementing cuts, and for pro-cuts councillors to stand aside. It is extremely overdue that they do so.

This should be combined with John McDonnell pledging that all councils who use reserves in order to stop cuts and austerity will have them replaced by an incoming Labour government. A continued failure to take a clear stand on this vital issue will inevitably lead to doubts that Labour is serious about fighting austerity. How can it be otherwise when workers living in Labour local authorities are suffering it at their hands?

The Socialist Party is standing candidates in these local elections against some of the worst Blairite cutters as part of our ongoing campaign for a socialist alternative and for a fighting programme to stop the cuts.

Wirral Tories raise spectre of Militant - but Liverpool's 1983-87 council shows way to fight cuts

Mark Taylor, Wirral Socialist Party

"Don't let them do to Wirral what Derek Hatton and Militant did to Liverpool last time" was the warning of the Wirral Conservative Group's outrageous and desperate front page advertising wrap, printed for the Wirral Globe on 20 March. On 24 April, they stepped it up further: "Seven days to stop a Militant council".

Perhaps they used the advertising space to cover up the shameful headline of the actual front page behind the advertisement. It read: "Sex work link to welfare reform? Wirral MP leads inquiry into fears Universal Credit is driving women into prostitution".

After all, we must ask ourselves why on earth the people of Wirral wouldn't want to repeat the legacy of the socialist-led Liverpool City Council of 1983-1987. This council, in which supporters of Militant, forerunner of the Socialist Party, played the lead role, took on Thatcher and fought to implement pro-working-class policies.

These included: much needed council houses and flats - 5,000 built; rents frozen for five years; nurseries and leisure facilities opened; £10 million invested into schools; and 10,000 people a year employed on the council's Capital Programme.

Sadly, this is a far cry from the role being played by Labour councillors today, and that means the prospect of 'another Liverpool' in the Wirral is not what Labour is offering, despite what the Tory ads claim.

Heroic role

In fact, in contrast to the heroic role played by the 'Liverpool 47' councillors who stood up to Thatcher, Labour councils across Britain are currently dutifully implementing Tory austerity.

Research published by the British Medical Journal shows over 120,000 people have died unnecessarily as a result of Tory cuts to health and social care.

Between 1979 and 1983 the Tories had slashed £120 million from Liverpool City Council's budget. In addition to that, the outgoing local Tory-Liberal administration had left unallocated cuts of £10 million and was making 2,000 redundancies.

Contrary to the trite assertion put forward by Tories and Blairites that Militant and the Liverpool Council were unpopular, nothing could be further from the truth. The council had mass support and was never defeated in an election.

The anti-cuts Liverpool 47's leadership of the council attracted higher votes than in any election since World War Two.

On three occasions 30,000 council workers took strike action to defend the policies of the council. And the council couldn't have achieved what it did without mass support from the labour movement and wider working-class communities.

A combination of Labour leader Neil Kinnock and unelected judges undemocratically removed socialist councillors from office. Instead of passing on further Tory cuts to the people of Liverpool, the 47 councillors (of which a minority were Militant supporters) adopted the slogan "better to break the law than to break the poor".

It shows what councils can and should do to take on Tory austerity now. It is disgraceful that Blairite-led Labour councils and councillors today prefer to spend more time attacking Corbyn and the legacy of this struggle than they do fighting Tory austerity!

Council workers continued to support the councillors after they were removed from office and subjected to huge fines. One of the 47 councillors, Tony Mulhearn, was shown solidarity by council bin workers who volunteered to help him pay his fines by having an attachment in earnings on their own pay packets.

Solidarity of this kind is never extended to a person who is part of something genuinely unpopular with the workers!

The misleading and threadbare Kinnock-narrative about 'taxis delivering redundancy notices to council workers' is a tall tale rehashed by both capitalist media pundits and Blairites.

A recent Guardian article repeated the infamous part of the speech that Kinnock gave at the 1985 Labour party conference, where he "condemned the 'grotesque chaos of a Labour council hiring taxis to scuttle round the city handing out redundancy notices to its own workers.'"

Redundancy notices

The redundancy notices were actually issued as a stalling tactic to buy time so as to put pressure on the Labour leadership to support the council's no-cuts budget strategy. But as Tony Mulhearn and Peter Taaffe recount in their book *Liverpool - The City That Dared To Fight*: "While the Liverpool councillors were in power, from 1983-1987, no one was made redundant.

"Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Neil Kinnock in the autumn of 1987, when he pushed for 40 real redundancies among staff at the Labour Party's Walworth headquarters."

But this attack, like the recent one from the Guardian, is about slinging mud at the role Militant played in Liverpool council, which has been recognised by the working class in Merseyside and internationally.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Corbyn is also the subject of similar smears and witch-hunts. This is why, calling on the active support of Labour's members, trade unionists and socialists, Corbyn needs to act decisively to ditch the Blairites.

This could allow the working class to reclaim the Labour Party as a political organisation of its own.

This is why mandatory reselection of Labour MPs and the replacement of pro-cuts councillors with anti-austerity candidates - basic democratic accountability - are important. Labour members should be allowed to deselect MPs if they act like Tories and cause harm to the most vulnerable in our communities.

The idea of protecting the most vulnerable in society is something to be praised!

Leicester: No-cuts budget only way forward

Tom Barker, Leicester Socialist Party

With just five days until polling day, Leicester Socialist Party hosted a public meeting to spell out our plan to fight all austerity cuts if elected to the city council.

The meeting was wide-ranging; covering topics from cuts to local services, addressing the mental health crisis in our schools, the NHS, and supporting the climate strike.

Sofia Wiking, city council candidate for Knighton ward, introduced the discussion followed by Steve Score, Leicester Socialist Party's mayoral candidate.

Since the 2007-08 capitalist financial crisis we have faced years of cuts and austerity.

In Leicester, the Labour mayor and councillors have passed these on by slashing our services. With the exception of social care, Leicester council services have been cut by more than half in the past ten years.

Steve said: "If we don't fight, we will have no services left at all. What the Socialist Party is proposing is to resist austerity - to set a 'no-cuts' budget. To use the money that does exist in the reserves: more than £100 million.

"However, the money would not last forever. The point about using the reserves is that it gives you time to go to people in Leicester whose services are threatened, to go to workers on the council whose jobs and terms and conditions are threatened, and say: 'If you back us in setting a no-cuts budget, we need you to be involved in a campaign to force the money from the government'."

Force for change

"I think we have proved by our record as the Socialist Party in campaigns like the successful save Glenfield children's heart centre - of which I was the chair - that if you mobilise people, if you get thousands of people on the streets, if you get people involved in action, then that is a powerful force for change.

"If we can do it over that, we can do it over council cuts - especially when we have a government that is on the ropes, as it is at the moment."

Steve explained that, whatever the result on 2 May, the important thing is to build a mass movement to end the Tories' rule and build the fightback for socialism.

- See '[Local government in crisis: Councillors can fight cuts](#)' by Tom Baldwin
- Around 40 Socialist Party candidates are contesting this year's council elections in England on 2 May, under the electoral name of Socialist Alternative. For results see socialistparty.org.uk.

Worcester: Fightback against library cuts

Sean McCauley, Worcester Socialist Party

The third instalment in the campaign to see off the cuts to services at St John's library, Worcester, took place on 20 April when 30 protesters gathered outside the library itself. This protest followed two successful public meetings in February and March.

Socialist Party placards calling for 'no cuts', 'no job losses', 'no privatisation', 'no closures', 'save services at St John's Library' were brandished by all age groups. The small shopping area resounded to the chant of "they say cutback. We say fightback".

We need councillors who will fight the government for the return of the £168 million cut since 2012, and an end to the current wave of attacks. We need councillors who will vote against all cuts and who will lead, along with the trade unions, a fightback campaign which involves all council workers, community campaigners and services users.

By using the £2 million of reserves currently available and by borrowing prudently, we could offset the immediate threats to give ourselves time to mount a mass campaign to fight Tory austerity.

An immediate easy win would be cancelling the two main Private Finance Initiative contracts in the county. Firstly, the deal struck over Bromsgrove schools (which were rebuilt some years back and which will end up costing us £221 million over 25 years). And, secondly, the deal for Hartlebury incinerator, which syphons £12 million a year.

Mark Davies, Socialist Party member and Socialist Alternative candidate in the local county council elections, spoke at the protest. He pledged to link up with any Labour councillors committed to voting against all cuts.

We will, however, expose all those, including Labour councillors, who blindly pass austerity onto to working-class communities.

Local unions can play a key role in opposing all these cuts by mobilising its members in defence of jobs and services. The convening of a council-wide workers' meeting, or a series of area meetings, to discuss concerted opposition up to and including strike action would be a start to the process of forcing the hand of the employers.

A 24-hour stoppage in opposition to all cuts would send a clear message to local Tory councillors and council officials.

The next step in our campaign is a march around St John's on Saturday 18 May at 11am, starting from the library.

We also intend to link up with users of other Worcestershire libraries like Rubery, Warndon, Droitwich and Tenbury Wells so a joint protest can be built in advance of the issuing on 6 June of the report on the sham consultation process.

Union action needed to fight Tory Derbyshire Council cuts

Chesterfield Socialist Party

Derbyshire's local government unions must respond with boldness and determination in the face of the Tory-controlled county council's latest round of austerity.

Last year, the council announced plans to consult on 'outsourcing' 20 of its 45 libraries to volunteers. Like virtually all local government consultations these days, the exercise was just an excuse to add some 'democratic' gloss to a decision already made in principle. That decision has now been confirmed.

Despite massive opposition among the workforce, the union leaders have not translated this into any form of action to prevent the transfers. Experienced library staff are about to lose their jobs.

This move will 'save' Derbyshire County Council £1.6 million. To put that into context, they have just announced a spend of £100 million over the next five years on the roads.

More recently, the council has attacked the school meals service by cutting back on hours. Some workers will face hours cut below the level where they can receive in-work benefits, so forcing them out of the job market because they will get more money by not working!

School meals workers in Derbyshire have already lost hundreds of pounds as a result of the council withdrawing from paying the Living Wage. Now many face losing another £1,200 a year.

It is a scandal the council could be forcing some workers to use food banks, a much-commented-upon irony given their occupation.

Knife crime

In another drastic cost-cutting measure, the Tory council has met the public's increased concerns over knife crime and street violence by putting at risk the jobs of 200 staff employed in the early help services for young people.

On all of these 'consultations', the council has simply ignored the unions' representations and refused to change its plans. It has no intention of listening to reason. Only the threat of action will force it to backtrack.

This is even more important over the biggest proposed change - privatisation of corporate property work, encompassing cleaning, caretaking, grounds maintenance, plumbing, electricians and so on. This could see up to 1,500 staff sold off to private contractors - more Carillions and Interserves in the making.

The annual budget of the whole operation is much less than the proposed increased annual spend on potholes and roads. It is simply a means to line the pockets of big business with revenue from the public purse. It must be fought.

Sadly, to date, the unions' responses have been inadequate. Campaigns are launched then peter out as leaders are not prepared to take the next step - moving from publicity to action.

The way to tackle such huge cuts is for all the unions to unite around a common programme of fighting austerity, which starts by telling workers their unions will back them fully. This will increase the confidence of trade union members and will also act as the best recruiting tool possible.

The success stories of striking council workers recently in Glasgow and Birmingham need shouting from the rooftops - these show what can be achieved with a bold union leadership.

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- Chesterfield Socialist Party public meeting: 'the state of the unions'
 - Tuesday 14 May, 7.30pm, Upstairs @ The Chesterfield Alehouse, 37 West Bars, Chesterfield S40 1AG
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Valentine victory: School strike beats council cuts

Unions must call national action

Nick Chaffey, Southampton Socialist Party

Teachers and support staff at Valentine Primary School, members of the National Education Union (NEU), are celebrating an important victory following strike action. Union members reached an agreement with Southampton's Labour-run city council for a two-year freeze on cuts.

A united campaign of school staff, the NEU, the head teacher, the senior leadership team, governors and parents, stood solidly together over months of organising. We fought to ensure the damaging cutbacks were not inflicted through staff cuts - with the inevitable knock-on effect on those remaining in their jobs and their ability to meet the needs of the children.

A city-wide campaign under the banner of Southampton Fair Funding for All Schools, in which local Socialist Party members have played a leading role, has organised rallies, demonstrations, public meetings, council

lobbies, petitioning, and school-gate leafleting across Southampton. The NEU strike action at Valentine has put school funding on the top of the council agenda.

Schools are at a breaking point, and the fight shown at Valentine Primary must be repeated across the country.

The schools funding crisis has not gone away. The Tory government's brutal austerity measures bear down on schools. Nationally, pupil funding has been slashed by 8%.

In Southampton, 64 out of 64 schools have had their budgets cut! The impact means one school in Southampton is sacking its entire team of teaching assistants.

Southampton's pupil referral centre, which supports excluded children, is cutting its places. This will undermine support to some of our most vulnerable children and add extra pressures back into mainstream schools.

As wider council services are cut, like social services, youth services and child and adolescent mental health services, underfunded schools are being left to pick up the pieces as the damaging impact of austerity and growing child poverty hits working-class communities hard.

The NEU has welcomed the decision of Southampton Council to use its powers to avert cuts. This approach should be extended to all schools in the city. A further 13 are in deficit with those remaining running out of reserves and making cuts. The situation is only getting worse.

But this victory does show that school cuts can be fought. It shows that local councils, when pushed, can protect school budgets. Moreover, if linked to a wider campaign bringing together teaching unions, parents and local councils, backed up with national strike action, the potential exists for a decisive victory - to restore school funding - against this divided and hated lame Tory government. Such a fight could draw in support to oppose all council cuts.

It is shameful that Southampton's right-wing, Blairite Labour council, instead of leading this fight, has been demanding that schools carry out cuts. This goes alongside closing care homes and cutting Sure Start and social care budgets.

That is why Socialist Party members are standing four candidates in the local elections on 2 May. Our candidates give full support to the NEU, the strike action at Valentine and the fair funding campaign. We are putting forward a socialist alternative to cuts, campaigning to elect fighting councillors who will refuse to vote for cuts and lead a fight against school funding reductions and all council cuts.

If Jeremy Corbyn was to call on Labour councillors to join the fight to stop council cuts the support would be enormous. He should be calling on councils to use reserves and borrowing to protect jobs and services, committing an incoming Labour government to reimburse any local authority which took such steps.

Such a campaign could decisively undermine Tory austerity and open the way to an early general election to sweep the Tories out of office.

PCS union pay strike ballot: huge result must launch fightback, despite Tory legal barrier

Marion Lloyd, PCS national executive committee (personal capacity)

Members of civil service union PCS have achieved a historic high in our 2019 pay strike ballot - falling just short of the anti-democratic threshold for lawful national action.

Now it is urgent that the union leadership launch pay claims in every group which has a basis for industrial action.

The ballot closed on 29 April. The result announced on 30 April showed a six-point increase on last year's turnout - an unprecedented 47.7%, the union's highest ever. This is testament to the tremendous efforts by reps and activists throughout the PCS.

The Tories' arbitrary 50% turnout threshold is not applied to any other voting arrangements in business or politics.

Resounding mandate

Were it not for that, the 59,452 members who voted by a massive 78.9% for strikes, and 91.3% for action short of strikes, would have won a resounding legal mandate.

We are ruled by a Tory government without a majority in the Commons, and which has suffered the biggest defeats in parliamentary history to its Brexit deal. But still it clings to the reins of power!

How does this square up to that same Tory party illegalising strike action supported by a stonking majority of voting union members? The hypocrisy is incredible. Their 'democracy' declares a pro-austerity minority legitimate, and a pro-strike majority illegitimate!

Falling just short of the anti-union laws' anti-strike rules doesn't lessen the achievement of such a huge vote for action.

Nor does it mean the union's campaign against the eleventh year of pay restraint is over.

Many departments and groups will have exceeded the threshold for legal strikes. The leadership must urgently release this information, and launch coordinated pay claims among those groups of members.

Friday protests

A good start would be calling Friday lunchtime meetings outside every PCS-organised workplace. These meetings should receive reports from the national executive committee; protest against pay restraint, office closures and job cuts as well as the anti-union laws - and start planning group strike campaigns where possible.

To carry on the fight, the PCS needs a combative, socialist leadership. The ballots for the union's assistant general secretary and national executive committee close on Thursday 9 May. Voting is by post, giving activists just a few days more to get out the vote.

Socialist Party member Chris Baugh is the official candidate of Left Unity, the union's broad left group, for assistant general secretary.

Socialist Party members Marion Lloyd and Dave Semple are also seeking re-election to the national executive committee.

While building for the next steps in the pay campaign, in the time that remains we are also calling on all fighting members to go round the offices, ensuring members vote for Chris and the Left Unity-backed 'Democracy Alliance' slate.

Threshold or no threshold - the fight goes on!

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Usdaw conference 2019

Tesco: profits for bosses, job cuts for workers - Usdaw union must fight back!

Scott Jones, chair, Usdaw East London Retail Branch C026 (personal capacity)

As delegates arrive in Blackpool for the annual conference of Usdaw, the retail and distribution union, many shop workers are facing job losses and worse pay and conditions as the retail crisis deepens.

At the same time, some bosses are celebrating. In April, Tesco announced a 30% rise in profits to £1.7 billion, with chief executive Dave Lewis saying: "After four years we have met our turnaround goals. I'm very confident that we will complete the journey in 2019-20."

But up to 9,000 Tesco workers won't be around to complete "the journey." Despite the huge profits Tesco announced in January, up to 9,000 jobs could go, as bosses axe many in-store counters and hot food provision in staff canteens.

They would join thousands of other retail workers who have lost their jobs in recent years - the latest being Debenhams workers, after bosses announced the closure of 22 stores, affecting 1,200 jobs.

Shamefully, Tesco workers first heard about the changes in the press. After months of uncertainty, management is now calling those affected into redundancy meetings.

Tesco has talked of 'redeploying' some workers. But with 10,000 jobs already lost through not replacing staff who have left, the retailer can't be trusted.

Angry

Usdaw president Amy Murphy, a Tesco worker and member of the Socialist Party, has said: "Staff are angry, shocked and devastated. Particularly by the appalling decision to hold celebratory buffets in stores to celebrate the profits on the same day colleagues were told they were at risk of redundancy.

"Retail is under pressure, but Tesco still makes over a billion in profit, and staff played the crucial role in ensuring a good Christmas for Tesco and the rise in profits. We should fight every job loss and cut."

The bumper profit announcement shows not a single job should be lost, no counters should be scrapped, and no changes should be made to staff canteens. Even though some workers are currently going through the redundancy process, workers' anger demonstrates it's still not too late for Usdaw to fight - to prevent every job loss now, and to build a fightback to defeat future attacks.

Last year saw strikes by McDonald's, TGI Fridays and JD Wetherspoon workers, as well as by Tesco workers in Dagenham and in Ireland. This shows the potential for similarly low-paid supermarket staff across Britain to take action.

Tesco workers could also link up with customers who will be angry at losing in-store services. As well as urgent in-store union meetings, Usdaw should call public meetings to win support for the fight against these cuts.

Strategy

This year, Usdaw launched its 'Industrial Strategy for Retail'. This includes welcome measures: a £10-an-hour minimum wage, minimum 16-hour contracts, and the right to a contract reflecting regular hours worked.

Also, reducing the gap between chief executive pay and ordinary workers, and measures to stop corporate tax avoidance.

But it falls short of asking the central question behind the retail crisis: under whose control is the retail industry to be developed, and in whose interests?

Usdaw's 2017 conference resolved that failing retail companies should not to be allowed to sack workers and close stores, but be nationalised instead. Usdaw should make this a cornerstone of its industrial strategy for retail, including for profitable companies like Tesco.

Ultimately, only on the basis of public ownership and democratic workers' control can jobs be protected from the pressures of the market. Instead of the bosses running our high streets and supermarkets into the ground, we call for democratically elected committees of shop workers and the local working class to run retail.

Save our jobs! Fight for better pay! Build the 'campaigning union'!

Ryan Aldred Secretary, Usdaw Plymouth and District General Branch (personal capacity)

In the last year, we have seen another increase in the list of shops facing or entering administration. Familiar high-street names have closed their doors, with thousands of workers left with only the promise of poverty and debt from the broken Universal Credit system.

Likewise, we continue to see creeping casualisation in the retail sector, with zero and low-hour contracts on the rise.

But it doesn't have to be this way! Usdaw prides itself on being "the campaigning union," and a serious undertaking to build the 'Time for Better Pay' and 'Save Our Shops' campaigns is needed.

We need to see the union mobilise the full strength of its 430,000 members - organising campaign stalls, building demonstrations, and preparing for strikes if necessary.

Contracts

Fighting like this for employers and the government to establish a £10-an-hour minimum wage - and scrap zero and low-hour contracts, unless specifically requested by workers and subject to trade union conditions - would start to undo the insecurity and poverty increasingly offered by retail bosses.

We need to place demands on 'struggling' employers to open their books for the scrutiny of trade unions and the workforce - a proposition put forward by Socialist Party members calling for this is on the conference agenda.

If companies can afford overinflated salaries for bosses and dividends for shareholders, they can afford to raise workers' wages. If companies do face administration, we call for their nationalisation.

By demonstrating the strength of the union to combat the bosses and their Tory government, we can expand our membership and truly earn our spurs as a union that campaigns for a better future for workers.

This government is on its knees. With the strength of half a million shop workers, especially if reaching out to other unions for combined action, we could see the poverty conditions created by Tory and Blairite politicians consigned to the dustbin of history.

The Socialist Party says

- Open the books of the big retailers to inspection by workers and trade union representatives - to see where the profits have gone
- Raise the minimum wage to at least £10 an hour, end zero-hour and short-hour contracts
- Fight for a shorter working week, of no more than 35 hours, without loss of pay

- Nationalise big business in retail and distribution under democratic workers' control and management, as part of a democratic, socialist plan of production

Come to the Usdaw Activist (Socialist Party members in Usdaw) conference fringe meeting at the Almeria Hotel, 61 Hornby Road, Blackpool FY1 4QJ at 6pm, Sunday 5 May - speakers include union president Amy Murphy

- CWU conference 2019

Communication workers oppose second EU vote, and back new socialist 'Clause IV' for Labour

Socialist Party members in CWU

Postal and telecom workers have voted to campaign against attempts to remain in the neoliberal EU at the 2019 conference of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). Delegates also called for the Labour Party to re-commit to public ownership in its constitution.

The successful emergency motion on Brexit was proposed by the union's ruling national executive committee. This marks a welcome shift in the leadership's position. And it could be pivotal in swinging the balance of the simultaneous debate on a 'people's vote' in the Labour Party's national executive committee.

Three years ago, the CWU executive backed a Remain position. The arguments Socialist Party members in the union made then about the need to fight the EU's anti-worker institutions have since become even clearer. The leadership is now reflecting the real interests of members in the Brexit debate.

The Brexit motion does perhaps overemphasise a Labour government as "the only thing that will really improve CWU members' and workers' lives." Industrial action can achieve improvements under any government, and would be essential in shoring up a Corbyn-led anti-austerity government.

Just hours after this victory, conference voted unanimously for composite motion 55, to restore Labour's 'Clause IV' commitment to public ownership. The original Clause IV was stripped away, after many years of struggle, by Tony Blair and his privatising cronies.

This reflects a growing mood among CWU members and the wider working class of not accepting the Labour Party status quo. The union leadership must now translate this into action by campaigning for mandatory reselection, kicking out the Blairites, and a democratic collective voice in Labour for the unions.

It must also translate this constitutional aspiration into an industrial one. That means leading a fight for the nationalisation of Royal Mail, BT, and all the delivery and telecoms firms which exploit workers and consumers alike, under democratic workers' control and management.

Build student unions and walkouts to fight climate change and Trump!

Theo Sharieff, Socialist Students national chair

Donald Trump - the viciously anti-working class, sexist, racist, bigoted president of the United States - has announced that he plans to once again visit Britain this summer between 3-5 June.

Hundreds of thousands of mainly young protesters mobilised in July 2018 when Trump last visited, and Socialist Students alongside the Young Socialists led walkouts of school and college students in protest of

Trump and his pro-big business and bigoted agenda.

But Trump couldn't have chosen a worse time to visit the UK. As if his overt contempt for working-class people wasn't already enough to earn him the hatred of workers and young people across Britain, to top it off, he's also an infamous out-and-out climate change denier!

In the summer of 2017, Trump made the decision to pull the US out of the 2016 Paris climate agreement. It was a decision which rightly provoked outrage and disgust among workers and young people.

But in whose interests was that decision made? In the interests of fossil-fuel giants like BP and ExxonMobil, whose profits stand to suffer if fossil-fuel burning is successfully curbed. Trump decided to protect the greed of fossil-fuel industry capitalists at the expense of our planet.

Trump's visit comes at a time when tens of thousands of young people, school and college students, have been mobilising in the streets to fight against climate change.

No doubt the thousands of students who have been mobilising in the youth climate strikes will be furious that the climate criminal-in-chief is being invited to visit Britain by the incompetent Tory government!

Student unions

Socialist Students, since the start of the youth climate strike movement, has been calling and campaigning for the setting up of school student unions to help organise the movement and to defend the rights of students to protest.

But Trump's visit only underlines the vital need for school and college students to have organisations through which they can build, spread and coordinate walkouts.

The climate movement will not be the only moment in history that students can use such organisations. Events at the recent National Union of Students (NUS) conference - [which saw the right-wing leadership undemocratically push through a raft of 'reforms'](#) which further diminish its ability to lead students in struggle - only add to the urgency of this task.

We say now is more important than ever to build student unions to help organise our walkouts and to strike back against Trump's big-business agenda, and to fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism. We need to get organised in the struggle to end climate change, and fight for a future for working-class and young people, free from all forms of oppression, austerity, environmental destruction, and war.

- Visit socialiststudents.org.uk/resources for help with setting up a student union at your school or college

300 NHS nurse suicides in seven years - fully fund our health service now!

Beth Webster, nurse, Cardiff West Socialist Party

The NHS crisis has reached horrifying new levels. Over 300 NHS nurses have died by suicide in seven years. In 2014, one nurse a week took their own lives.

This is a tragic reflection of how overworked and desperate staff have become in a health service decimated by Tory austerity.

The risk of female nurse suicide is 23% above the national average. More mental health support is desperately needed for frontline workers who deal with traumatic situations as part of their day-to-day job.

Breakdown

It has become part of the culture to just get on with it. It's common for nurses to break down crying on the ward, and to come in when sick because they feel too guilty to leave colleagues even more understaffed. These conditions, which cause and exacerbate mental health problems, will not change until the NHS is properly funded.

Wards are severely understaffed and nurses' pay has been held down so that many work several jobs to make ends meet. There are 40,000 unfilled nursing vacancies and recruitment has been made even more difficult since the Tories cut and abolished the student bursary. One of the student nurses who took her own life was working two other jobs on top of her full-time training.

The Tories are indifferent to the terrible consequences of their cuts. The NHS is £8 billion in deficit. Patients are dying in corridors and staff are being driven to suicide. We need the Tories out now.

Health trade unions should be leading the fight against these intolerable conditions. We need to push the leadership from below into action. By linking with other unions and public campaign groups, we can push the Trade Union Congress to call coordinated strike action, forcing the Tories out and a Corbyn-led government in.

We demand the nationalisation of pharmaceutical and medical supply companies, which drain NHS resources for their own profit.

All privatised parts of the NHS should be brought back into public ownership, and PFI debt must be cancelled. Only in a fully funded, democratically run, socialist NHS will the needs of patients and staff be fully met.

Port Talbot steelworks rocked by an explosion - nationalise the plant to save jobs and lives!

Gareth Bromhall, Swansea and West Wales Socialist Party

In the early hours of 26 April, Port Talbot in south Wales was rocked by a large explosion that residents report sounded like a bomb which could be heard miles away.

The incident at the town's Tata steelworks, that employs thousands directly and supports thousands more in the area, was caused by the spillage of molten metal being transported across the site by train.

Two workers were burned during the accident and are still being treated in hospital. Tata have since made it clear in public statements to reassure shareholders that output would not be affected as the blast furnaces where restarted on 29 April.

Residents have expressed fear over safety at the site. [Three workers were killed in an explosion at the steelworks in 2001](#) and this latest accident prompted one resident to ask "if one day we'll go up with it".

Safety fears have also prompted the steelworks' trade unions to call a meeting to discuss health and safety at the plant.

Socialist Party members and the National Shop Stewards Network have been involved in campaigns in recent years to save the plant after its planned mass layoffs, supported workers during a pensions battle and for its future during a planned merger.

Throughout these campaigns we have put the demand of public ownership to the fore, explaining that, under private ownership, profit will always outweigh the jobs, conditions and lives of the workers at the plant at the heart of the local community.

Nationalisation under democratic workers' control and management is key to saving and improving the plant.

Ultimately, the only way to permanently guarantee jobs and safety for all would be to fight for a socialist society, with a democratically planned economy to meet the needs of all.

Build a universal safety net - abolish Universal Credit!

Dave Semple, PCS union national executive committee (personal capacity)

Thousands of Universal Credit claimants are not getting the money they are entitled to - and desperately need - without even knowing.

The Child Poverty Action Group has revealed that errors and cuts are hidden by decision letters which just give a final amount - for six previously separate payments - without showing the working.

Meanwhile, almost two million claimants will be £1,000 a year worse off under Universal Credit, according to Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis.

The government's flagship benefit has a total lack of transparency. Administered by civil servants in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Universal Credit has already been attacked this year by a parliamentary committee for driving claimants into "debt and despair."

Workers in the DWP, thousands of whom either claim or will claim Universal Credit themselves, are well aware of this grim reality.

Members of civil service union PCS took strike action in Wolverhampton and Walsall on 11 and 12 March. One of our key concerns is a lack of staff to deal with the tens of thousands of calls from distressed and vulnerable claimants.

The union has been busy preparing members at other sites to join the strikes - even while running another strike ballot of all members across the civil service to break the Tories' pay cap (see p6).

Since 2010, the Tories have cut more than 30,000 DWP jobs. This includes key areas such as DWP Visiting, which helped vulnerable claimants understand what they are entitled to and sort out problems with claims.

The tide of job losses has mostly been stemmed. But even this year, the government is pushing hundreds of staff out the door - as decisions to close offices, as recently at Balham, really begin to bite. In contrast, PCS wants 5,000 extra staff recruited to ease pressure and help claimants.

Unity

Meanwhile, the government is busy thinking through how best to apply sanctions - withdrawal of benefits - to those claimants who have a job, if they cannot show they are looking to increase their earnings.

These plans, if implemented, will apply to civil servants who claim the tax credits component of Universal Credit. This only underlines the need for unity between claimants and DWP workers, in opposing Universal Credit, and in demanding a genuine, universal safety net for all.

Currently, PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka is president of the Trade Union Congress (TUC), and full-time employees of PCS are or have recently been presidents of the Welsh and Scottish TUCs.

Outside of press releases, the silence of the leadership of the trade union movement has been deafening when it comes to opposing Universal Credit and sanctions.

Only a united campaign by the organised working class, both benefits workers and benefits claimants, including strike action, can guarantee the pushing back of this hated cornerstone of Tory austerity.

PCS needs a socialist leadership to drive this forward. PCS members who want to see this should vote for Socialist Party member Chris Baugh for assistant general secretary, and for the Democracy Alliance slate in the national executive committee elections.

But all workers and claimants have a stake in this. The Socialist Party fights for the trade union movement to take the lead, calling mass mobilisations and building towards joint strikes, to bring this hated Tory government down.

Universal Credit disaster behind foodbank rise

Universal Credit is being blamed for the record rise in the use of foodbanks as families required them to provide 14 million meals in the last 12 months.

Over 1.5 million food packages were handed out in the year up to April 2019, a rise of 20%, with over half a million going to children.

At the same time, the Tories have given the rich nearly £20 billion a year in cuts to Corporation Tax alone!

Universal Credit must be scrapped and replaced with benefits that provide enough to live - paid to all those who need them. And there should be investment in a mass scheme of job creation - providing decent jobs to working-class people, with a minimum wage of at least £10 an hour.

Fracking mess

The government's fracking tsar, ex-Labour MP Natascha Engel, has quit six months into the job. She claims rules the government has been forced to adopt, which mean fracking must be suspended every time a 0.5 magnitude tremor is detected, means that campaign groups "were driving policy". She says that the government is "pandering to what we know to be myths and scare stories" about shale-gas extraction.

But the 'myths' are real, and fracking continues to only be pushed by big business despite complete condemnation by climate scientists, campaigners and trade unionists.

Engel claims the rules effectively mean a 'ban' on fracking. But the government has long been a supporter of fracking and has helped its big-business mates push ahead with it wherever possible. The new government rules are a welcome response to pressure.

To ensure a real ban on the dangerous practice we need proper democratic control by working-class people of land and resources as part of a socialist plan - in the interests of the working class and the environment.

India General election shows crying need for independent socialist alternative

Jagadish G Chandra, New Socialist Alternative (CWI India)

The huge exercise of India's 2019 general election is under way across its 29 states and seven Union territories.

The last five years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's abhorrently casteist, brutally capitalist and cut-throat communal regime have rammed home clearly how not to govern a country of 1.34 billion people.

Nevertheless, the rich and powerful, and even much of the middle class, are rooting for Modi's return to power.

The parliamentary general election in India involves 900 million voters - by far the largest electorate in the world. Voting started on 11 April and takes place in seven stages. All the votes to elect 543 members of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the parliament, will be counted on 23 May.

More than 50 parties are contesting these elections. Most of them are small with only regional or state appeal. The main parties are the ruling Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress.

There are four main national pre-poll alliances - the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) headed by the BJP, the United Progressive Alliance headed by the Congress, the Grand Alliance of regional parties, and the Left Front of 'Communist'-leaning parties called Mahagatbandhan.

Lives blighted

Though the BJP is currently less popular than in 2014, given the fractious nature of the opposition parties, there is the possibility of Modi and his party, the BJP, returning to power. Under his rule, the lives of the people have been blighted by communalism, sectarianism and the poison of religious majoritarianism, which goes in the name of "nationalism".

The choice of contestants from the various political parties, but particularly the two principal ones - the BJP and Congress Party - shows that the reference to 'secularism' in the preamble of India's republican constitution is merely a word, with no importance attached to it. All the establishment political parties violate the constitution in letter and spirit with equal impunity.

Among the two major parties, 16 out of 83 candidates from the BJP and 22 out of 83 candidates from the Congress Party have serious criminal cases declared against them. There are 401 (32% of all candidates) who have assets worth 10 million rupees or more. This includes 69 out of 83 candidates from the Congress Party and 65 out of 83 candidates from BJP.

A distinction, however, must be drawn between the brazenly right-wing BJP and the Congress Party. Congress is traditionally known as the party of liberal social democracy - the legacy inherited from its long history in the pre-independence era, of fighting British colonialism.

On the other hand, Congress has been in terminal decline since the early 1980s. It has been unsuccessful in doing the balancing act of appeasing its social democratic base while keeping intact its ties with traditional big business.

This dilemma of Congress has cost it dearly over the decades. India's big business leaders have found a 'fast-track friend' in the BJP and other regional capitalist parties.

The oppressed poor and the landless masses, which were once considered a formidable support base for the Congress, have waited for nearly six decades for a better future.

Now, increasingly, they are losing their faith in this party. The hollow sloganeering of Congress, which once carried the tag of the party of the independence struggle, stands exposed.

The voices of peasants and workers, of Dalits and Adivasis (members of oppressed castes), are muffled. Most political parties ignore them.

It is evident that the real beneficiaries of government policy since 1991 have not even been the middle class, but the richest 10% of Indians who own 75% of the country's wealth. Centre stage has been the interests of prominent business houses.

This year's election is being held and fought not on real issues faced by the people. The opposition to Modi's regime is left with no choice but to deal with the issues that the Sangh Parivar (a coalition of Hindu nationalist organisations) dictates.

Since winning the election in 2014, Modi and the BJP have spread communal poison, including mob lynching, using a very well-orchestrated network of organisations linked to the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Blatant cronyism

While attention was diverted to divisive social issues, Modi succeeded in fine-tuning the Indian economy in the interests of the capitalist class, with unprecedented blatant cronyism creeping in.

In the first few months of his ascent to power, Modi dismantled the decades-long policy of five-year plans. They had not been perfect, but had leaned in the direction of public ownership and developing the state sector. The BJP regime replaced them with technocrat-driven policy-making which favoured the big corporations.

All the promises Modi made during 2014 are an embarrassment to him now. Unemployment is the highest for four and half decades - around 6.1% in 2018.

The promise of 20 million jobs being created a year has become a subject of ridicule among the urban youth. India's working-age population is currently growing by 1.3 million each month, exacerbating a stagnant jobs market.

India's economy has been expanding by more than 7% annually - the fastest pace among major economies. But uneven growth has meant there are not enough jobs created for those millions of young Indians entering the workforce each year.

In January this year, the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, an independent think-tank, said the country lost as many as 11 million jobs in 2018. This was the year following the infamous economic bungling of Modi's 'demonetisation' - in which 500 rupee and 1,000 rupee notes were taken out of circulation.

Agrarian distress is at its peak. This too can cost Modi dearly in the ongoing elections.

Not surprisingly, his government has attempted very late in the day to win over 120 million small farmers who hold less than two hectares of land by giving them 6,000 rupees (£66) per annum as income support. But this is a drop in the ocean of distress in which the impoverished peasants are sinking.

Neither this so-called reform measure of Modi's nor the proposal of Rahul Gandhi for a Universal Basic Income of 72,000 rupees a year (roughly £800) will help farmers deal with the massive indebtedness that often drives them to take their own lives.

Meanwhile the number of dollar millionaires in India in 2014 rose to 250,000 from 196,000 in 2013 - an increase of 27%, according to a recent report. The report also predicted that India would have 437,000 millionaires by 2018, and potentially double that number by 2023.

While the number of millionaires increases steadily, rural India, which constitutes 66% of the total population, still languishes in poverty. The highest paid member of three quarters of rural households earns less than 5,000 rupees (around £55) per month.

One of Modi's favourite lies was that his 'Make in India' initiative would attract investments from all over the world, as the multinational corporations would be eager to take advantage of India's youthful population.

But Foreign Direct Investment as a percentage of GDP has remained limited to around 2%, and only a tiny proportion of this has gone to the manufacturing sector. This, combined with the invasion of manufactured goods from China, means India's manufacturing sector has had negative growth.

Wealth has continued to be concentrated at the top of Indian society. It is no exaggeration to say that Modi's government of the last five years is the most regressive that India has experienced since independence from the British Raj.

Nonetheless, it is true that Modi, through his divisive agenda camouflaged as 'development', has held even some sections of workers and other oppressed people under an illusionary spell.

Politics is concentrated economics, but the right-wing demagogue Modi practices 'politics by other means'. He uses the language of communalism and even engages in warmongering.

This 2019 election has become a stage for him to make claims about the threat of war with Pakistan (even going close to instigating one). He uses majoritarian religious nationalism with the aim of creating a 'them and us' atmosphere.

This election has seen the lowest of lows, with Modi repeatedly asking youth voters to dedicate their first ever votes to honouring the 40 soldiers who died in the Pulwama terror attack, allegedly perpetrated by a Pakistani suicide bomber of Jaish-e Mohammed.

BJP leader, Ranjeet Bahadur Srivastava, asked voters to cast their ballot in favour of Modi if they want to destroy Muslims.

Economic failure

There is now a definite erosion of the popularity of Modi and the BJP because of their dismal failure on all fronts, particularly the economic one. It is very evident from the BJP election rallies that the previous confident fanfare is missing.

Modi's famous slogan of "Sab Ka Saath-Sab Ka Vikas (with everyone, for everyone's growth)" in the 2014 election, promoting his vision of all-round development, is conspicuously missing this time.

Instead, together with his coterie, he is resorting to desperate communal and war hysteria. Modi went to the extent of declaring and threatening Pakistan by saying, "they should not think India's nuclear weapons are meant for Diwali fireworks displays".

Modi and his ilk can be defeated. But what are the possibilities of such an outcome in the given scenario of a divided opposition to Modi's regime?

More importantly, under what programme and platform can such a welcome thing happen?

The platform of 'lesser evilism', on which the so-called alternative to Modi and the BJP has been cobbled together, is built on the quicksand of caste, regional and numerous parochial identities. Ironically, in contrast to it, Modi's virulent Hindu majoritarian nationalism can appear immensely attractive.

It is easy to paint Congress and other capitalist opposition forces, who are rabidly casteist, misogynist, sexist and anti-working class, simply as anti-religious or secular in comparison to the RSS-BJP, which is openly communal and has never hesitated to use fascistic methods to terrorise the people.

Independent class alternative

What is worse is the fact that the traditional left, comprised of the communist parties, who rhetorically claim to be guardians of the working class and the poor peasants, are failing in their duty to provide an independent class alternative instead of cosyng up to Congress and other discredited bourgeois parties, giving certificates of secularism to them

The very crude narrative of 'BJP versus the Congress Party' or 'fascism versus secularism' is a scarecrow used to dampen the combative spirit of India's working class and peasantry who have taken on Modi's communal regime - through massive general strikes and through walking protests of peasants and the landless.

The most recent general strike was just months ago, with a record participation of 220 million workers. Both workers and peasants have also been involved in 'long marches' to parliament on specific issues.

What the BJP fears most is the eruption of anger at the deep class divisions in society. It desires a Hindu block without class divisions where it can hide its real nature - its own class interests, those of capitalism.

Though it would be the worst outcome from a socialist and class point of view, it is most likely that Modi's BJP will return to government, albeit with a reduced majority, for want of a credible alternative.

We continue to campaign on the basis of a programme of slogans and demands for the current situation in which the traditional parties continue to abdicate their historical responsibility to lead the working class to fight for an independent socialist alternative to capitalism and against the communal politics of India's ruling classes.

- Say 'no' to the BJP!
 - Reject the Indian National Congress too
 - Fight communalism, casteism and the right-wing RSS and BJP for social justice!
 - Build the struggle with united working-class action for jobs, wages and homes for all
 - Build the left and an independent socialist alternative
 - For a mass party of the working class and all other oppressed groups!
-

France Telecom: Privatisation in the dock following suicides allegedly caused by the bosses

Steve Poole

As chief executive officer of the recently privatised France Telecom (now Orange), Didier Lombard was a 'master of the universe'. And on a salary of €500,000 to boot.

In 2006, without trade union consultation, he imposed a three-year restructuring plan in a bid to shed 22,000 posts and retrain a further 10,000 staff. However, of the 102,000 France Telecom workers, 65% had job protection status as public servants.

Management reportedly made no bones about wanting to strong-arm them to leave within three years - to demoralise them in any way managers saw fit in order to get them to throw in the towel and quit.

A new, brutal company culture apparently pushed well-qualified and adjusted employees around like pawns with the unofficial aim of 'breaking' them. Now, following a spate of suicides, Didier Lombard and six of his executives face possible imprisonment as victims of their own 'success'.

Didier Lombard, together with head of human resources Olivier Barberot and Deputy CEO (and restructuring-drive architect) Louis-Pierre Wenes, faces trial at the Paris Criminal Court and a possible two-year custodial sentence for "moral harassment". A further four executives face a charge of complicity in workplace harassment.

According to the judges' 650-page file some 4,000 France Telecom executive managers were trained each year to "make people move" by exerting maximum pressure, receiving bonuses proportionate to the number of employees they forced out.

The SUD-PTT union filed a lawsuit in 2009 for "endangering lives" through "extremely brutal management methods" and a seven-year legal investigation began, based on thousands of emails, Power Point presentations and the testimony of dozens of employees.

Coordinated onslaught

In a coordinated onslaught, staff were allegedly driven to despair through a range of measures designed to degrade and destabilise. Workers were repeatedly transferred away from their families obliging a mother to travel two hours to work each day.

Others were 'forgotten' during an office move leaving them in their former office for weeks without an office, desk or chair and far from ex-colleagues.

Some were given meaningless, degrading roles clearly inferior to the positions they had held. Others faced unobtainable performance objectives in roles for which they had received no requisite training or impossible targets in high-pressure call centres.

Many took their own lives at work. In September 2009, a 32-year-old law graduate, after emailing her father a suicide note, threw herself from her fifth-floor office window in Paris following a meeting to discuss the reorganisation of her customer service department.

Two days earlier, a 48-year-old technician in Troynes stabbed himself repeatedly in the stomach during a staff meeting in which he was told he was being transferred to another post.

A worker in Marseille left a note saying "management though terror" had driven him over the edge and that he was "committing suicide because of my work at France Telecom. That's the only reason." A woman in Metz tried to kill herself after being transferred for the third time in a year.

A 51-year-old father of two jumped from a motorway bridge outside the Alpine town of Annecy, leaving his wife a suicide note blaming the "atmosphere at work" and stating that his work had driven him to despair since a transfer from a back-office role to a sales target-driven call centre.

He told his colleague he couldn't sleep and couldn't go on. France Telecom staff booed Didier Lombard when he visited the dead man's workplace in Alby-sur-Cheran.

By 2009, following the 25th suicide in 18 months at a research and development centre in Brittany, Louis-Pierre Wenes (deputy CEO in charge of restructuring) was forced out by trade union pressure and restructuring itself was suspended with 500 temporary transfers frozen.

There had been angry union protests at France Telecom sites around the country to press for better working conditions. "This is now a company with the single goal of making money... employees of France Telecom were used to another work relationship with customers", said the general secretary of the CDFT trade union.

"This is a drama which resonates throughout French society given how much France Telecom is viewed as part of our national heritage" wrote the Le Figaro newspaper. Having previously dismissed the spate of suicides as a "mode" (fashion) Didier Lombard was forced to step down as CEO in 2010 accepting he had "underestimated a certain number of human factors"!

The suicides brought the unwelcome publicity and sparked government scrutiny, though thousands more had been forced to resign through workplace-triggered anxiety and depression.

The company hammered out a scheme with the unions to set aside in the order of a billion euros to boost staff morale.

A helpline was set up and 100 additional human resources staff were taken on to tackle workplace stress. Importantly employees over the age of 57 were also now entitled to work part-time on almost full pay.

The investigation has already concluded that the moral responsibility of the seven defendants for the social crisis is proven. It is now for the courts to decide on their criminal responsibility.

"Warning"

With 35 suicides over two years the CGT union has stressed that sentencing should serve as "a warning to all companies who make shedding jobs the alpha and omega of their strategy, in the name of profit and to the detriment of their employees' lives".

The investigation has focused on 39 employees as victims, 19 of whom took their own lives, 12 who attempted suicide and eight who suffered from deep depression and were forced to stop work as a result.

Although a comparatively unknown concept in UK law, moral harassment (or "mobbing") claims have been legally recognised since 2002 in France under the French Employment Code.

It is defined as a situation where an employee is subjected to repeated acts which may result in degradation of their working conditions that may undermine their rights and dignity, affect their mental health, or jeopardise their professional future.

HSBC France already lost a claim in 2009, though concerning only one employee and her line managers. This is the first case of institutionalised harassment that the court will have to decide.

The trial runs from 6 May to 2 July at the Tribunal de Paris. Bereaved families and friends will of course be there to demand executives be held to account for the contempt and inhumanity their loved ones had to suffer.

Socialists stand for dignity at work. We fight for the nationalisation of the major monopolies that dominate the economy and, crucially, for them to be run under democratic workers' control and management as part of a socialist plan of production.

Scandinavian Airlines walkout disrupts Nordic air travel

Edmund Schluessel, Sosialistinen Vaihtoehto (CWI in Finland)

Hundreds of flights in Norway, Sweden and Denmark have been cancelled as 1,400 pilots for Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) began strike action on 26 April.

Pilots took the step of escalating to strike action after collective bargaining negotiations on pay, working hours, scheduling and outsourcing broke down between SAS and trade union SPF (Svensk Pilotf-rening, Swedish Pilots' Association).

Wilhelm Tersmeden, chair of the SAS employees' section of the SPF, blames SAS bosses for the strike: "My understanding is that SAS did not want to continue the talks", he told Swedish news agency TT.

"For me it's pointless to sit with your mouth shut at a negotiating table when one side is just sitting there and saying 'no' to everything."

SAS pilots struck over pay in 2016, but were defeated after four days.

The relative militancy of the SPF is possible because the union is not part of Sweden's bureaucratic, collaborationist trade union federations - but its small size also makes it harder to build solidarity action from other unions, despite high levels of public sympathy.

The need for solidarity across unions is underscored by the success of dockworkers in Sweden, who took over a month of strike action earlier this year on the basis of establishing a national collective bargaining agreement.

The impending threat of escalating to national action brought employers back to the bargaining table with independent dock union Hamn.

Workers need fighting unions and unions need fighting federations, with socialist leadership to connect their immediate goals to a coordinated programme for action to benefit the entire working class.

In the Swedish government, they have the opposite - Prime Minister Stefan L-fven. L-fven, just a few years ago a trade union leader, now heads a government which last week launched its planned attack on the Employment Protection Act, or 'Las'.

In the words of Tobias Baudin of the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, changes to the Las would "set the labour market back 50 years" by making it easier for bosses to terminate workers.

Nationalisation

Workers should fight not just for better conditions but for SAS, partly owned by the Swedish and Danish governments, to be brought into full public ownership and put under democratic control of its workers and travellers.

Such a victory is the only way to build an environmentally sustainable, equitable airline guaranteeing good wages and working conditions to all employees.

And Swedish workers and unions should use their May Day platform to launch a coordinated campaign to stop marketising "reforms" to the Las, and to prepare for a general strike to put the weak, unstable L-fven government under pressure from below.

Swedish bosses are able to attack the Las only because of the willingness of the Social Democrats to collaborate with the neoliberals. If workers unite their struggles to build a fighting mass party of the working class, both Sweden's capitalists and its far right will run scared.

EU elections: Countering Farage's right-wing Brexit Party

Clare Wilkins and Gary Freeman, Nottingham Socialist Party

Ex-Ukip leader Nigel Farage has launched the Brexit Party to fill the vacuum in British politics for a political party with a definite position to leave the EU amid the Tory meltdown over Brexit and Ukip's implosion. But Farage says it won't publish its manifesto until after the EU elections!

With Labour still failing to put forward a clear programme for a workers' Brexit and a socialist Europe, and working-class leave voters feeling alienated, the danger is that Farage's right-wing party will pick up support. Indeed, on 20 April, over 500 people paid £2.50 each to attend a Brexit Party rally in Nottingham.

Prepared to engage

Outside the rally was a Stand Up To Racism protest, which included socialist Leavers and Remainers.

Nottingham Socialist Party felt we needed to try and engage with alienated workers going to the rally, so we leafleted and talked to people.

We used the slogan "no second referendum - general election now" to catch attention.

And we explained that the longer pro-austerity politicians squabble over EU exit and the Tories are in office, the worse life will be for the working class, whether we voted remain or leave.

Apart from a small number who were abusive, around 50% of people took our leaflet. We also had some positive conversations around our demands.

Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party need to categorically adopt a socialist EU exit position or some working-class leave voters could be pushed into the arms of the Brexit Party. The Brexit Party has no programme to stop austerity or the hostile environment created by the Tories in most areas of life in modern Britain.

While we call for a properly funded NHS and other services, in contrast Nigel Farage has previously raised that there should be an insurance-based health system run by private companies.

Our leaflet ended with: "We want to see a Jeremy Corbyn-led government with socialist policies negotiating a pro-worker EU exit in the interests of the 99%."

For a government which supports workers' struggles against the bosses in Britain, Europe and across the world.

For unity of workers across Europe - no to racism - don't let the bosses divide us. General election now!"

Swansea anti-far right protest

A rally by far-right For Britain leader Anne Marie Waters, an openly racist islamophobe and political ally of Tommy Robinson, was held in Swansea on 27 April.

A motley crew of 40-50 people gathered for a 'national mobilisation' within a tight police cordon to hear Waters's hate speech, under the guise of a pro-Brexit protest. Some local Leave voters expressed later on social media that they felt tricked into attending a rally for an openly racist organisation.

The far-right elements, although at times vocal, were without their usual insignia and paraphernalia in an attempt to legitimise the rally as purely pro-Brexit.

The rally was countered by a few hundred local people, including activists from Socialist Students and the Socialist Party, trade unionists and local community groups.

A separate "multicultural festival" was organised by Stand Up To Racism (SUTR). It included speeches from local Labour Party politicians - whose spending cuts have had a direct effect on the rise of racism in our city.

Socialist Party

But thanks to the intervention of Socialist Party activists, most present ignored the insistence of Socialist Workers' Party members in SUTR to attend the festival and instead took part in a direct counter-protest against the far right.

Our placards and chants of "jobs and homes not racism" were well received. Several young people approached us about getting involved and the majority of those present on the day were convinced about the correctness of our tactics.

It is past time that trade unions stopped franchising out the anti-racism struggle to SUTR's ineffective tactics and programme, and started taking seriously the task of building an anti-racist campaign in the face of a growing far right, emboldened by Brexit confusion.

Swansea and West Wales Socialist Party

Waltham Forest TUC May Day

On 28 April Waltham Forest Trade Union Council hosted two important events in Abbots Park in Leyton, east London.

People gathered to mark Workers' Memorial Day, to pay tribute to workers killed, injured, disabled and made unwell by their work. Workers like Raymond Holmes, who was killed working on the Thames Water site in Coppermill. Raymond's wife and daughter sent the trades council a note of thanks for remembering him and for keeping up the tradition.

A special appeal was made to remember Lyra McKee a journalist and NUJ member in Northern Ireland recently shot while doing her job covering a disturbance in Derry.

This was followed by a festival to revive May Day. It was a mixture of great entertainers and great speakers from a range of organisations including Chris Baugh, assistant general secretary of the civil servants union PCS.

Reader's comment

Knife crime - a product of capitalist misery

We need trade union action, not more repressive powers

Chas Berry, chair, Napo union Kent, Surrey and Sussex branch (personal capacity)

Several recent tragic deaths of teenagers in 'knife crime' incidents have raised concerns about the level of violence affecting young people in England and Wales.

One in particular - the stabbing of Jodie Chesney, attacked near a children's play area in Essex before dying from a single wound - sparked a national debate about what is perceived to be an escalating crisis.

ITV weatherman Alex Beresford hit the headlines when he passionately interrupted an otherwise-anodyne discussion on Good Morning Britain to say prison does not and cannot work, and unless wider social problems of school exclusion, homelessness and lack of meaningful employment are addressed the problems will continue.

His intervention went viral on social media, as did the brilliant deconstruction of myths surrounding 'black-on-black' violence by the rapper and social commentator Akala.

A rise in the number of recorded deaths from sharp instruments such as knives is beyond dispute, and at a record level. Home Office figures show 285 such homicides in 2018, the highest since 1946. There was a marked increase earlier this year, although the total number of known incidents reported in the press so far stands at around average.

These crimes also disproportionately affect certain social groups. The figures for 2018, for example, show that one in four victims were aged between 18 and 24, and 25% were black. But people from those demographics make up just one in 12 and 3.3% of the UK population respectively, based on ONS data.

Epidemic?

Does this mean, then, that we are facing an epidemic of violence that threatens to engulf a generation of young people?

The figures should be seen in the context of overall trends. 2018's record figure is only just ahead of the previous peak of 272 in 2007, and follows eight years of steady decline.

There is also the question of how these incidents relate to the scale of violence in the population as a whole.

As Akala helpfully pointed out on Channel 4 news, "there are 1.2 million black people living in London. In a bad year 50 of them will kill someone. That represents less than 0.04% of the population.

"In Glasgow in a bad year, say 2005, 40 people were murdered. That means you were more than twice as likely to be killed."

At the same time, ONS figures for 2018 show 79% of all recorded violent incidents did not involve a weapon of any sort, and only 6% reported use of a knife.

Moreover, the Crime Survey for England and Wales - which includes offences not reported to police - suggests overall levels of violence have fallen by about a quarter since 2013.

Of course, none of this detracts from the horror of the incidents which have occurred. And what we can say with certainty is that police-recorded statistics, which tend to pick up the more 'high-harm' crime, show the most serious violent crime is increasing.

So how should socialists and trade unionists respond to this emerging picture? Firstly, there is no evidence that tougher sentencing acts as a deterrent or reduces the incidence of violent crime in the long run.

Over the last 30 years, the prison population has risen 77%. Three times as many are sentenced to more than ten years for the most violent crimes than a decade ago.

But the proven reoffending rate also remains stubbornly high, at nearly a third of all those leaving custody.

Of course, this is against the backdrop of drastic cuts to prison staff, slashed by a third between 2014 and 2017. Also the disastrous part-privatisation of the probation service in 2014, described by her majesty's chief inspector as "irretrievably flawed."

It is just not possible to help many people turn their lives around when there are not enough resources put into support change in any meaningful way. Within the context of generalised austerity, prisons and probation have become the warehouses and holding pens of those least able to manage in society.

This is reflected in the shocking numbers of suicides both in custody and on release.

The mother of a released prisoner who took his own life while at a probation hostel recently complained her son had no opportunities, and kept a diary of how he wanted to kill himself because he was not seen as a "whole person."

It is no surprise that over half the current prison population were permanently excluded from school, and around half were in care as children.

Cuts

School academisation, increasing pressure to remove 'difficult' children from the competitive environment, and cuts in early help services that support struggling families, have increased the likelihood of small numbers of young people turning to crime.

Austerity pushes some that way out of material necessity, and hopelessness does too in a search for some kind of meaningful identity as part of a gang. Having taken that step, carrying a knife often becomes the means to gain respect from others as desperate as you.

It may take many generations before socialists can claim the anger and alienation fostered by capitalism, responsible for so much of the violence we see today, is a thing of the past.

But in the meantime, we oppose simplistic 'solutions' which increase tension and play into the hands of the bosses. Tougher sentencing, increased powers to stop and search, and so on - these do nothing to restore public confidence, but increase the stigmatisation and criminalisation of youth.

Instead, the trade unions must lead a fightback. The Socialist Party demands a real living wage for all, mass building of council homes, free education, reversal of cuts to youth services - this could rapidly undercut the conditions that breed violence.

Calling mass action to end this devastating Tory government would be an excellent start, laying the basis for an anti-austerity government - and showing young people there is a constructive, collective route out of misery.

The Socialist Inbox

Do you have something to say?

Send your news, views and criticism in not more than 150 words to Socialist Postbox, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, phone 020 8988 8771 or email editors@socialistparty.org.uk.

We reserve the right to shorten and edit letters. Don't forget to give your name, address and phone number. Confidentiality will be respected if requested.

Views of letter writers do not necessarily match those of the Socialist Party.

Notre Dame disaster

Hundreds of millions have been donated for the restoration of Notre Dame. It is a good thing there are no poor Parisians who need the money.

Rich individuals and corporations have rushed to make pledges and salve their consciences. No doubt they expect to go to Heaven. It is more likely that a camel will pass through the eye of a needle!

Under Macron, one in five French families do not eat three meals a day. He is committed to restoring Notre Dame as a matter of prestige. His 'amour-propre' (self-love) is worth any amount of money.

The most recent report by church charity Secours Catholique states that "poverty is not diminishing. The number of vulnerable families with children - mainly, but not exclusively, single-parent families - continues to increase.

"The poorest amongst them, more than others, express a need to be heard: poverty is not only material and isolation is felt with increasing severity. New families who are closest to the poverty line are no longer able to make ends meet, between meagre resources and growing essential expenditure.

"Finally, the percentage of foreign nationals in vulnerable situations encountered by Secours Catholique in France is significantly increasing despite their overall number being stable. This confirms their increasing insecurity in our country."

The rich preside over an increase in poverty, and Macron, the 'president of the rich', does nothing. The face-saving pledge to rebuild Notre Dame is hypocritical in the extreme.

Derek McMillan, Worthing

I can understand people being angry, because there is almost universal sadness about the fire at Notre Dame, while hundreds of people remain homeless after Grenfell, children are living in abject poverty, and there is a crisis of homelessness.

But I think this is a false dichotomy. With the redistribution of wealth in a socialist world, it would be possible both to end poverty and homelessness and to fully fund arts and culture. We shouldn't have to choose between the two.

The fact that billionaires are coming forward to fund the restoration of Notre Dame shows there is no shortage of money. It would appear that the "magic money tree" can be conjured up when it suits.

It is up to us to ensure that the fruits of the money tree are used to fund the basic needs of people as well our cultural icons. The way to do this is through a planned economy, rather than charity at the whim of the 1%.

Dave Lunn, Wirral

XR and poll tax

Much as I share Tom Bawden's view in the i newspaper of 24 April that the Extinction Rebellion protesters' anger over government inaction has "catapulted climate change into the spotlight," I think they still have a way to go to meet his claim that theirs is "the biggest civil disobedience event in modern British history."

The House of Commons Library collated statistics for me, from the Home Office, of cases taken to the magistrates' courts for refusal or inability to pay Thatcher's poll tax. At over 25 million between April 1990 and September 1993, compared to just over 1,000 climate change cases so far which may end up in the courts, the poll tax rebellion still takes some beating.

It not only ground the legal system to a halt across the whole country, but led directly to the downfall of the prime minister of the day. I wish the climate change protesters the same good fortune.

Dave Nellist, Coventry

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What the Socialist Party stands for

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

The organised working class has the potential power to stop the cuts and transform society.

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 socialist international that organises in over 40 countries.

Our demands include:

Public services

- No to ALL cuts in jobs, public services and benefits. Defend our pensions.
- 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 and 'free schools'!
- 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.

Work and income

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to £10 an hour without exemptions as an immediate step towards a real living wage. 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 retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension.
- Reject 'workfare'. 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. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

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, gender, 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.
- For the right to vote at 16.

Mass workers' party

- For a mass workers' party drawing together workers, young people and activists from workplace, community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business parties.
- Fight for Labour to be transformed into such a party: deselect the Blairites!

Socialism and internationalism

- No to imperialist wars and occupations.
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system 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' neoliberal European Union and single market. For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!

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