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Editorial from the Socialist issue 799

Floods chaos: End cuts now!

The misery continues. As we go to press there are still 118 flood warnings and 166 flood alerts. Four people have died.

Thousands of houses and properties are under water. Sinkholes also pose a threat. And the Environment Agency (EA) has highlighted the problem of ground water, meaning saturation can prolong flooding even when the rain has eased.

With the flood waters that are devastating lives across the country come revelations about the reality of Con-Dem Britain.

Firstly and unquestionably the floods have shown again that the Coalition spending cuts are a disaster.

This is not news to the millions of people whose lives have been devastated by job cuts, benefit cuts, or service cuts.

The GMB union explained that the current flooding crisis is due to "successive years of central government cuts that have trimmed maintenance budgets and staff levels to unsustainable levels."

Since the government came to power the EA capital budget has been cut by a whopping 28%.

On top of the job cuts at the EA, the Guardian has revealed that "flood-stricken communities, including the Somerset Levels, have been left without planned defences following government funding cuts".

A Panorama programme reported that a £256 million scheme to protect towns flooded by the Thames may never be built. See pages 6 and 7 for more on the impact of spending cuts.

Attempting to dodge some of the odium coming his way Prime Minister David Cameron let the cat out of the bag.

Rather than the usual insistence on 'difficult decisions' and 'belt-tightening', he said: "Money is

no object in this relief effort, whatever money is needed for it will be spent."

Despite the "no blank cheque" backtracking attempts, Cameron's "we are a wealthy country" claim reveals that when the pressure on government is urgent enough, particularly when it could threaten Tory votes, the money can be found. So why not for the bedroom tax? Why not for investment in jobs for young people?

Trade union and anti-cuts meetings must discuss how Cameron and all the cuts-supporting parties can be made to feel people's anger.

Cameron's comments drive home what we already knew - that 'money is no object' for certain items. Look at the enthusiasm there is for spending £2.5 billion on F-35 fighter jets and the annual cuts to corporation tax, benefiting the super-rich bosses in the arms industry, banks and big business.

The PCS union estimates that £120 billion is lost every year through tax evasion and avoidance mainly by the same super-rich elite.

A reported 98 of the top 100 companies on the FTSE stock exchange, firms such as Tesco and Barclays, are using tax havens.

If the unpaid taxes of the super-rich and big corporations were collected the deficit could be wiped out.

That money, and what could come from the nationalisation of the banking industry and other measures, could reverse the cuts and fund quality flood defences.

The best way to ensure 'money is no object' when it comes to our jobs, pay, pensions, benefits and services is for our collective pressure to be asserted on the Coalition - most effectively through the calling of a 24-hour general strike.

Linked to this must be the fight for no cuts and socialist change so society is democratically organised and planned around all our needs, including the long-term safe-guarding of the environment.

Floods put Tories on the rocks

The floods are showing that people are angry. A ComRes poll found that nearly three-quarters of people said the Coalition didn't appear to be in control of the situation.

Rising water has exposed the fury against a pampered elite in Westminster that continues to

simmer below the surface.

A BBC Question Time audience in Scunthorpe raged against a millionaires' government that had only sprang into action when the floods hit the wealthy shires.

In the South East working class communities booed the Westminster 'wallies in wellies' for neglecting them.

The floods have given the lie to the Con-Dems constant claim that the private sector does it better and that shrinking government is the way forward.

As Jonathon Freedland put it in the Guardian: "Small-government ideology may fly in the think-tank seminar room, but when water's gushing through your letterbox, few people call for the Downing Street nudge unit." And that will probably, unusually, include some of the owners of riverside mansions.

Properly funded public services are vital for the running of society. Socialists also say they should be democratically run to meet the needs of all.

Richard Ashley, Professor of Urban Water at the University of Sheffield, said the findings of his report on flooding risk for the Labour government in 2004 have been ignored.

He correctly wrote in the Independent that "the situation in England is a systemic failure to take a longer-term and strategic approach to environmental hazards".

Ashley highlighted how pro-capitalist governments kowtow to the demands of big business to the detriment of the rest of us. "Fierce lobbying" by the building corporations delayed "the commencement of Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act, which sets out how sustainable drainage systems were to be used and maintained in all new developments." Last year local councils allowed almost 90 planning developments to proceed in areas at such risk of flooding that the EA formally opposed them, according to the Independent on Sunday.

Of course the short-sightedness is not helped by the climate change scepticism that has run deep in what was promised to be the 'greenest government ever'.

Environment minister and professed sceptic Owen Patterson has cut the number of climate change advisers in the department from 38 to six and halved the funding for research into climate change.

Both Tory and Ukip groups in the European Parliament abstained on a 2012 motion on the implementation of EU water legislation.

It was designed to tackle the "rise in the frequency and intensity of floods" with "adaptation and mitigation policies".

The vote emphasised "the importance of risk prevention, mitigation and response strategies to prevent water-related extreme phenomena".

Con-Dem seats under threat

But many people are drawing the opposite conclusion. A YouGov survey found that the number of people who think that the 'environment' is the biggest cause of concern has jumped from 6% to 23% in a month.

There are also predictions that the floods could further erode the Tories' electoral chances - after all many of the areas hit have been Tory-voting.

According to the Times, of the 40 most marginal seats held by the Tories, 15 have been affected by the weather. Lib Dem seats are similarly affected.

Labour leader Ed Miliband asked if Cameron was "reconsidering the redundancies" in the EA. Does this signify an anti-cuts stance? No.

Labour remains committed to Tory spending plans. Labour-led councils are busy voting through millions of pounds of more cuts.

And, indicating Labour's commitment to capitalism, a European election candidate has even advised Miliband to "hug a banker" in the week big-bonus Barclays announces thousands of job cuts. Labour offers no alternative to the cuts Coalition.

The floods expose the blind, chaotic nature of the capitalist system and its inability to deal with crisis.

As we wrote of the hundreds of thousands of victims of Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina, the suffering of the flood victims "is a monument to a blighted system".

In 2006 we contrasted "the lack of preparation, the inaction, inefficiency and corruption" in the US authorities to the "actions of Cuba, where the hurricanes' effects were mitigated through the voluntary movement of a million people before the hurricane struck.

"One system is unplanned and based on the interests of the propertied classes. The other, although unfortunately not a democratic workers' state, still has the outline of a planned economy, which makes it possible to lessen the impact of natural disasters."

This is the key revelation of the floods - an unplanned system run in the interests of the 1% will lead to misery for the mass of the population.

Although future weather cannot be exactly predicted, adequate investment in research, public services, defences and other measures can mean weather doesn't have to cause such suffering.

But that requires a system with the key sectors of the economy publicly owned and planned under democratic workers' control and management - a socialist system.

- Floods reveal rottenness of government cuts - see: <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/799/18165/19-02-2014/floods-reveal-rottenness-of-government-cuts>

Floods reveal rottenness of government cuts

Climate change policy failure

Pete Dickenson

Commenting on the most exceptional period of rainfall since records began 248 years ago, the Met Office's Chief Scientist, Julia Slingo, has said that "all the evidence suggests there is a link to climate change" and "there is no evidence to counter the basic premise that a warmer world will lead to more intense daily and hourly rain events".

She was introducing a Met Office report that links the floods to unusual weather in other parts of the world.

Variations in the North Atlantic and Pacific jet streams, (the powerful currents of air high in the atmosphere that drive weather systems), are connected to the present extreme weather in Europe and America.

In turn, these are partly a result of changing weather patterns in South East Asia and 'associated with higher than normal ocean temperatures in that region'.

The flip-side of the unprecedented rainfall in Britain and Western Europe, is drought elsewhere. California is experiencing its worst drought on record, following similar events in Australia and South Asia.

Studies of the worldwide pattern of extreme weather are making it ever clearer that human induced climate change is behind what is happening.

David Cameron has said he 'suspects' there is a link to climate change, but puts forward policies that will make it worse.

The centre of the government's energy policy is to promote fracking, alongside a massive expansion in the number of gas-fired power stations.

If these are allowed to go ahead, it will give a big twist to the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change.

Ed Davey, Lib Dem climate change minister, has now come out and attacked the Tories for not taking global warming seriously, conveniently forgetting that he was the author of the programme to bring in fracking and remains an enthusiastic supporter of the technology.

As well as pushing an anti-green energy programme, Cameron's administration cut the money needed to deal with the consequences of climate change.

In October last year, it was announced that the Environment Agency (EA) would be losing 1,400 jobs including 500 staff in the key service of flood risk management.

The effect on flood defences will be even greater than the loss of 500 staff suggests, since the crucial flood incident response role in the EA is carried out by staff from all functions, who provide an out-of-hours service, according to Kevin Warden from Prospect, the union that represents many EA staff.

Moving staff from other areas is also not a solution since they have critically important jobs such as radio-active waste management.

In 2009, the EA asked for £500 million extra over 25 years to deal with the consequences of climate change - this was flatly rejected.

In addition to EA job cuts, capital spending on flood defences was axed, from £680 million in 2010 to £533 million in 2013-14.

The rules on funding for flood defence were also changed to make it far more difficult to justify any expenditure, so that any scheme would have to show that £8 of financial benefit would result from every £1 spent.

'Unlimited funds'

Labour attacks on the Con-Dems ring hollow, since they were planning massive cuts to the EA if they had won the 2010 election, as well as rejecting the call for extra climate-change related funds in 2009 when they were in power.

Since the floods are affecting many affluent Tory voting areas, Cameron went into a panic and said that 'unlimited' funds will be available for dealing with the crisis.

It remains to be seen what Cameron's pledge will amount to. The government is already backtracking with the transport minister saying that there is "no blank cheque", and in the House of Commons on 12 February, the prime minister said nothing about reversing the job cuts at the EA, when challenged.

The extra £110 million announced two weeks ago will hardly restore the cuts made in 2011.

Whatever money does materialise, where it should go has been a controversial question. The obnoxious Tory MP Eric Pickles, temporarily in charge of the environment department, has said it was a mistake not to have dredged the rivers, which was based on the advice of 'so-called experts' in the EA.

This ignorant comment has been turned into government policy, although the evidence is that dredging would have made little difference to the flooding in Somerset.

In some circumstances dredging can make matters worse, since it can facilitate the flow of water from upland areas to cause more flooding downstream in built-up areas.

What is required is a long-term answer to the problem of flooding. First and foremost, this means tackling the root causes of climate change by switching to renewable energy, which could reduce the intensity of weather events, such as storms and floods.

Decisive action in this area, although crucial, will take decades to have an effect, so action is needed now to increase the capacity of the countryside to absorb rainfall, which has been significantly reduced by over-intensive agriculture, as well as strengthening flood defences.

Clearing uplands for sheep grazing has reduced the capacity of the land to absorb rainfall. Research has shown that full reforestation could reduce flooding peaks by 50%.

A policy to increase the capacity of the earth to hold water has been rejected by Cameron, in favour of dredging, but reforestation to deal with flooding is a policy supported by his own government in the tropics through the Department for International Development.

Counting the cost

In Britain, by clearing uplands, farmers can qualify for lucrative grants from the EU Common Agricultural Policy.

This incentive has driven deforestation of huge tracts, since land covered by trees is not eligible for subsidies.

At an early stage, the insurance cost of the floods was put at £750 million, but this will rise rapidly as the crisis develops.

The overall cost to society and the economy will be many times the insurance claims. Food production will be hit by having vast areas of agricultural land under water for up to six months.

Combined with a similar situation in North West Europe, and with droughts elsewhere, such as in the USA, there could be big rises in food prices again, cutting living standards, and hitting the poorest in society the most.

Until the present storms hit, the floods of 2007 had been almost forgotten by the establishment, but their cost was huge, £3 billion in insurance claims alone.

Despite all this evidence of the enormous cost of extreme weather events, not to mention the human misery inflicted, the government still takes no serious action to address climate change, which is the most probable cause of the deep intensity of the storms.

In fact, until the present situation developed, green issues had been buried, with the notorious statement coming from Cameron's office to 'dump the green crap'.

The present devastation will probably force the ruling class to take some short-term measures to adapt to climate effects, but they will fight any move to seriously tackle climate change itself.

The big corporations will lobby to stop any action that could in any way affect their profits, whatever the environmental cost to society.

There is nothing natural about disastrous cuts

Paul Couchman, Secretary of Save Our Services in Surrey

In recent months trade unions and residents in Spelthorne, North Surrey, have been campaigning against Surrey County Council's (SCC) plans to cut fire services in the borough by half.

Save Our Services in Surrey (SOSiS) has been at the heart of the anti-cuts campaign. Residents associations, the Fire Brigades Union and many local councillors have all been strident in their opposition to the cuts.

Just a few days after the Tory council cabinet voted through these cuts on 4 February, Spelthorne (and the surrounding areas) have seen the worst flooding for 250 years. Up to 10,000 people have been displaced from their homes.

Thorpe Park is being used to house evacuated people. The army have taken over one of the biggest council offices (the Runnymede Centre) to use as a base for their rescue operations and the local Fire and Rescue services have been working day and night to support, defend and rescue local people, along with colleagues from other areas like Northamptonshire and Norfolk.

A raft of MPs and party leaders have visited the area. A floating raft would have been more useful! Most of these dignitaries have been harangued by devastated and angry local people who believe any help has been too little too late.

Cuts in the Environment Agency have been a hot topic in the local press and the wisdom of cutting fire and rescue services is now being seriously criticised.

Local Tory MP Philip Hammond said any debate about flood policy and the cuts should wait for a 'slower time' while the immediate crisis was dealt with.

Flooding also seems to be a class issue. Troops were deployed in Datchet almost immediately (could this be because it is near to Windsor and Eton where the very rich, business people, bankers and politicians live and are 'educated'?).

Just down the river and under as much water, are the less exclusive areas of Wraysbury and Staines. It took a few outbursts on the TV news from local residents about the unfair distribution of help before similar mobilisations came down river.

One thing is clear. The government and local councils were totally unprepared for these floods. Cuts to dredging of rivers, flood defences, council staff and fire and rescue services are being shown to be a totally false economy.

SOSiS will continue to fight to defend and improve all local public services.

- www.sosis.org.uk
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Osborne's austerity is jeopardising the environment

A Unison rep in the Environment Agency

It seems a lifetime ago, but cast your minds back just over 18 months and Britain was in the grip of the worst drought for 100 years.

Fast forward to 2014 and we've witnessed some of the most extreme weather events on record.

At the forefront of this battle against the elements is the Environment Agency and its workers who have been on the frontline almost non-stop since last November.

Thousands of staff have been involved erecting defences day and night, warning communities and offering expert advice on how best to protect properties.

Thousands more have helped run 24-hour incident rooms and cover other duties such as pollution prevention and waste crime as the Environment Agency staff have pulled together.

It is particularly galling then that during all these efforts, the self-professed 'greenest government ever' of the Con-Dems is hell bent on sacking 1,700 staff across the Agency as Defra (the government ministry) seeks to deliver its cuts for Osborne's austerity package.

Essential activities which safeguard our environment are all in the firing line - no department is immune.

While some give assurances that the Agency can absorb these cuts without impacting on delivery, we know the real story that the ability to protect and enhance the environment will be severely curtailed.

Those areas hit particularly hard will include the prevention and prosecution of waste crime, monitoring and protection of migratory fish, pollution management and work with planning authorities to ensure safeguards are in place for new developments - it will effectively be a "licence to pollute" for unscrupulous operators.

The Con-Dems should implement an immediate moratorium and reversal of cuts within the

Agency and recognise that the cost of responding to incidents is much greater than the effective prevention which the cuts would compromise.

Cameron's hypocrisy

Prime Minister David Cameron now says "money is no object" when it comes to the floods relief effort, but how much has been spent on flood prevention?

Flood defence spending went into reverse after the 2010 austerity budget by almost £100 million a year.

Before Osborne's spending cuts the Treasury set a cost benefit criteria of every £1 spent resulting in £5 quantifiable benefit in alleviating flood damage. New rules mean that now, every £1 spent has to result in £8 of benefit.

Consequently, hundreds of flood defence projects were scrapped or are now seriously underfunded, including those on the Somerset Levels.

This underfunding contrasts markedly with the Netherlands where the government spends four times as much per capita on its flood defence infrastructure.

Yet the cost to economic output in the storm and flood affected areas of the UK could amount to nearly £14 billion.

In terms of spending on flood defences then clearly money is an object as far as the Con-Dem government is concerned.

Only after private insurance companies threatened to withdraw cover for 350,000 homes last June did the government agree an increase in flood defence funding.

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by Pete Dickenson

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High rents + low wages - End this housing misery

Sarah Wrack, Waltham Forest Socialist Party

'Generation rent' is becoming more like 'three generations rent'. The website spareroom.com has recently revealed that in 2013 more than 60,000 over-40s placed 'room wanted' adverts on the site.

So while it's widely acknowledged that young people will be the first since World War Two to be worse off than our parents, this suggests our parents aren't doing too well either!

Despite all the hot air about the magic wand of the government's help-to-buy scheme, owning our own home is completely out of reach for most of us. So, renting it is. And that's not a cheap option either.

The average monthly rent is now £676 in Britain. People in 17 London boroughs now spend more than 50% of their income on rent.

A recent Channel 4 report highlighted the case of Sian Green. Sian is 20, works 12 hours a day, six days a week and rents a bedroom in a London flat infested with cockroaches. She earns £800 a month and pays £700 in rent. Sian is nowhere near unique.

With wages stagnant at best and private sector rents sky-rocketing, a record number of 20-34 year olds now live with their parents.

The message is clear - if you're poor, you have no right to an adult life. Your punishment for not being able to find a job when there aren't enough, for being low-paid when wages are

declining or frozen, is to face overcrowding, poor conditions or even homelessness.

People are desperate. And landlords and letting agents know it. It's becoming increasingly common to ask potential tenants to 'bid' against each other and give the house to the person or family prepared to pay the most. What chance do we stand if we earn below average?

Never mind if we're unemployed or so low paid we have to claim housing benefit.

We're supposed to believe that there's no alternative to this madness. But then why has the problem got so much worse? Deregulation, privatisation and cuts. 25% of council housing, which used to be a safe and affordable option for working class people, has been sold off.

Nowhere near enough housing is being built. They've changed the definition of 'affordable' so that very few can actually afford it.

Enough is enough! We have to fight to end this housing misery and make sure everyone can afford a decent place to live.

We demand:

- Rent control - cap rents not benefits
- Council-run, not-for-profit letting agencies and local fair rent councils
- Job creation and a genuine living wage
- Axe the bedroom tax
- A mass programme of council house-building and renovation

Scotland: 'Project Fear' goes into overdrive

Philip Stott, Socialist Party Scotland

The growing conflict over Scottish independence has dramatically escalated following the coordinated intervention by the main pro-union parties.

They have ruled out an independent Scotland forming a currency union with the rest of the UK. This choreographed assault on the Scottish National Party's (SNP) plan is designed to undercut support for independence ahead of the referendum on 18 September. It may, however, have the opposite effect.

"If Scotland walks away from the UK, it walks away from the UK pound." This was Tory

Chancellor George Osborne's stark warning to those considering voting Yes.

Within hours Labour's Ed Balls had given the same message. Lib Dem Danny Alexander insisted it was "crystal clear a currency union would create unacceptable risks".

Scottish first minister Alex Salmond responded by claiming that "the reality is that a formal currency union with a shared Sterling area is overwhelmingly in the rest of the UK's economic interests... the stance of any UK government will be very different the day after a Yes vote." The Scottish National Party (SNP) leadership has also raised the possibility of refusing to pay Scotland's share of the UK debt if they are frozen out of a currency union. Osborne's threats

The outright refusal by the main capitalist UK parties to allow an independent Scotland to be part of a sterling zone is a serious threat.

It reflects the overwhelming opposition of British capitalism to the possible break-up of the UK state. And they are prepared to fight tooth and nail to prevent it taking place.

As it slowly dawns on the SNP leadership that an independent Scotland may not be able to participate in a formal single currency arrangement, they are likely to put more emphasis on the other options contained in their "fiscal commission" which reported last year.

This put forward four options: a sterling zone, the euro, a Scottish pound pegged to sterling and fully separate Scottish currency.

The SNP will still continue to argue for their preferred option, hoping that post a successful Yes vote there will be a change of position by the main capitalist parties.

The SNP leadership have failed to grasp the reality of the entrenched class opposition to Scottish independence by the majority of the British establishment.

As a Financial Times editorial pointed out: "What is not in doubt - and has been too little discussed - is that the rest of the UK would be weakened.

"The international status of the 'rump UK' would be diminished. Britain's prized reputation for political stability would slip; investor confidence would be lost."

Or, as Cameron put it recently, "independence would rip the rug from under our reputation."

This nightmare scenario is driving the anti-independence campaign. "Project Fear", the self-styled name of the Labour and the Con-Dems' Better Together campaign, has stepped up its propaganda drive recently in response to polls showing a small increase in support for

independence.

Since the production of the SNP government's White Paper on independence at the end of November 2013, nine opinion polls asked how people intend to vote in September.

The Yes vote stands at 40%, an increase from the 38% average from August to November 2013.

Economic disaster?

Even this modest increase has sparked concern and nervousness in the pro-union campaign. Since the start of 2014 a deluge of press stories has appeared predicting an economic disaster should Scotland vote to separate itself from the UK.

RBS will leave Scotland, as will Lloyds, Tesco Bank and Scottish Widows. Power bills will rise, elderly care will be unsustainable, supermarkets will increase food prices, the pensions system will collapse.

These doom-laden predictions have not resulted in the polls moving the way the pro-union lash-up had hoped. Hence the need for Project Fear to move up a further gear.

But the SNP's vision for an independent Scotland isn't bolstering support for independence either. The White Paper from the Scottish Government confirmed that under independence the SNP intend to continue with cuts and cut taxes even further for big business.

They are opposed to even modest measures of public ownership, even for profiteering gas and electricity companies.

The plans for a currency union with the rest of the UK underpinned the SNP's White Paper. It would be the "best option for business." Under Salmond's plan, an independent Scotland would concede control over interest rates to the Bank of England and, in practice, give up a significant degree of control over Scottish budgets.

This fiscal union as well as a monetary union would bind an independent Scotland into an austerity pact.

A separate Scottish currency - as advocated by sections of the Yes campaign and former deputy leader of the SNP Jim Sillars - would not offer an automatic way out either.

Only a wide-ranging programme of socialist measures, including a refusal to pay the debt stacked up by the bailout of the banks in 2008/09 linked to the full democratic nationalisation

of the banking system and the major sectors of the economy can lay the basis for a way forward and a full reversal of the cuts.

In effect the SNP's 'independence' is a form of 'devo-max' with a large element of a federal arrangement still in place. Their vision is based on a continuation of a crisis-ridden capitalist system.

Socialist Party Scotland, while supporting a Yes vote in September, is campaigning against the SNP's pro-business blueprint.

We stand for an independent socialist Scotland as part of a democratic and voluntary socialist confederation with England, Wales and Ireland as a step to a socialist Europe.

- www.socialistpartyscotland.org.uk

Affordable childcare? And where are the jobs?

A north London parent

In Con-Dem Britain childcare is extortionate. Nearly a third of parents with children under five spend 30% of their monthly income on childcare.

As the parent of a seven-month old, at the NCT (National Childcare Trust) monthly 'coffee mornings' I go to, you would be forgiven for thinking the talk would revolve around our babies.

But no, the cost of childcare, the scramble for quality places and the fear of going back to work (emotionally and financially) dominate the discussions.

So genuine proposals from the government and opposition on helping with the burden of childcare and helping the 64% of mothers not in work that say the high cost of it is a barrier to them taking employment, are likely to be big vote winners.

Last week Ed Miliband announced that Labour's childcare plans would get '570,000 mums in jobs'. Labour is proposing an increase in free childcare for working parents from 15 to 25 hours, for three and four year olds, to make this happen.

Alongside this, all parties are agreed on the idea of lengthening the school day to 'help' working parents.

This would have a big effect on the economy. The Institute for Public Policy Research has said that Labour's proposal would give the Treasury £20,000 more than it costs over a four year period.

They also state that getting 280,000 mothers back into the workforce would generate an extra £1.5 billion in tax revenues and benefits savings.

However, how Labour plan to find jobs for those 570,000 mothers they will free from the shackles of expensive childcare is a gaping omission from the proposals.

Are they expected to join the 2.32 million people officially unemployed at present in the fight for the paltry 569,000 job vacancies nationally? (Office for National Statistics - 22/01/14)

Labour and the Con-Dems also omit how they plan to achieve proposals on childcare provision while they (both in government through central cuts and cuts by councils) have closed 578 Sure Start centres between the election and November 2013.

In fact under David Cameron, while the number of under-fours has risen by 125,000, there are 35,000 less childcare places.

Cuts

Alongside this there have been large cuts to already overworked school teaching staff (and their pay and conditions) and the government wants to increase this burden by introducing proposals to have primary schools provide places for two year olds too.

The moves proposed by the government and Labour all point in the same direction: 'battery farm' style childcare where, in a bid to tie parents to their desks for longer, they put their children in facilities with not enough staff (the government also plans to change the 1:8 staff ratios for after school clubs in primary schools to as much as 1:30) and under-qualified staff.

If the government and Labour are serious about helping families with the cost of childcare they should look at tackling the poverty of low wages and the cost of the care that forces parents into a financial straitjacket.

Barclay's bonuses - laughing all the way to the bank

A finance worker, Leicester

It has been announced that Barclays Bank is to cut 10,000-12,000 jobs in 2014, 7,000 of which will be in the UK.

This comes hot on the heels of the 7,650 jobs axed only last year. Chief Executive Antony Jenkins cited 'loss of profits' as the reason for giving 9% of his staff the sack, 92.5% of whom will be frontline workers.

But despite Barclays' profit slump, its pre-tax gains were still £5.2 billion for 2013. The pocketing of this at the expense of providing secure employment starkly reveals their priorities.

Some of the primary causes for this loss of profit have been the costs of 'internal restructuring' and paying legal costs. £1.2 billion alone has been spent on the 'Transform' programme to change Barclays into a 'better-behaved' bank, ie to operate legally within regulatory guidelines.

These changes come in the wake of a series of scandals surrounding Barclays, including being the market front-runner in mis-sold PPI, fined £290 million for rigging Libor interest rates, forced to dissolve their tax avoidance division, as well as thousands of files of customer data being leaked and sold.

This is not to mention the central role the finance sector as a whole played in the 2007-8 crash, which has devastated millions of lives around the world.

It is clear that banks like Barclays do not feel they bear the responsibility for the destruction they have wrought.

Instead, the price of Barclays' illegal gambling and profiteering is being passed on to their workers in the form of job losses.

The latest affront came when it was revealed that at the same time thousands are being laid off, the bank's bonus pool for 2013 rose by 10% to an eye-watering £2.38 billion! Investment bankers in particular are seeing an increase of 13% (£1.6 billion).

Since public money was used to bail out the banks they have paid out much more in bonuses than in corporation tax, with Barclays in 2012 paying £82 million in CT while having a bonus pool of £2.1 billion!

It's obvious that the banks are incapable of restraint when there's the potential to make a quick buck.

Improving trade union membership among finance workers is a key first step towards fighting

back against these attacks.

Ultimately though, unless the banks are taken into public ownership there will be no stopping the practices of gambling and corruption, and the public will inevitably be footing the bill.

Them & Us

Boom and bust

Last year government business secretary Vince Cable boasted of rising output in Britain's car industry as illustrating a recovering UK economy.

What Vince forgot to add was that it's boom time for car bosses but job cuts, short-time working and pay freezes for car workers.

Last year 87,000 people worked in the UK's auto industry, compared to 123,000 in 2004. And while wages for the lowest-paid 30% of car workers have fallen by 7.5% since 2009, the average pay of the highest paid directors at the UK's six largest carmakers has rocketed by 34% in real terms.

Pay squeeze

What's happening in the car industry is mirrored elsewhere. According to the government's own figures real wages have continually fallen since the onset of the recession in 2008, as pay levels have been eroded by inflation.

Nuclear crap

The cost of clearing up the radioactive sludge at the Sellafield nuclear site in Cumbria is estimated at a staggering £70 billion.

But where there's muck there's brass, and the private consortium involved in the clean-up - Nuclear Management Partners (NMP) - is quids-in.

According to the Public Accounts Committee, the government granted a five-year extension to NMP's contract last year despite being £2 billion over budget and accused of endless delays and costs spiralling out of control.

The government also passed up an opportunity to bring the clean-up operation back into public hands.

Slam dunk

UK Sport recently announced its funding for Olympic games. Canoeing got £20 million, sailing £25.5 million and equestrianism £18 million.

However, basketball - a large working class participation sport - had its budget cut from £8.5 million to zero.

As David Walsh, the Times sports writer, concluded: "To think Lord Coe sold London as an Olympic host able to inspire the youth to participate in sport. What a joke that now seems."

Billionaires row

An estimated 800,000 people are on council housing waiting lists in London as the capital experiences its worse ever housing crisis.

At the same time there are at least 740 uninhabited mansions worth a combined value of £3.2 billion, enough to fund the building of more than 10,000 affordable homes.

There are 72,457 empty homes in London, of which 24,226 are classified as 'long-term empty'.

According to empty homes 'detective' Paul Palmer: "Offshore investors are still using some of London's finest homes as real-life Monopoly pieces, hiding behind solicitors and anonymous PO box accounts in places like the British Virgin Islands."

Many of these mansions are left to rot, even though they could be compulsorily purchased and repaired and converted to flats. But local authorities won't do so because of the spending cuts.

Bosnia: mass protests show potential of working class to overcome division

Niall Mulholland

A revolt of workers, students, the jobless and war veterans has swept across Bosnia Herzegovina, in protest at dire economic and social conditions and institutionalised ethnic division.

The protests began in the northern town of Tuzla and quickly spread to the capital, Sarajevo, and other cities and towns.

These inspiring mass movements are testament to the ability of the working class to recover from even the most serious setbacks and to once again take to the road of collective struggle for social change.

For several weeks, sacked workers in formerly industrial Tuzla demonstrated following the privatisation of a string of state-owned companies which were stripped of assets and allowed to collapse.

The protests then grew as laid-off workers were joined by youth and the unemployed. In response, the Tuzla government sent in the riot police, causing violent clashes.

This only spurred the Tuzla protesters, who held a larger demonstration on 4 February calling for the resignation of the local government, for a reversal of the privatisations and for pensions to be paid.

On 7 February, tens of thousands marched on Tuzla's cantonal government and municipal buildings, which were burnt.

Although most protests have, so far, been in mainly Bosniak (Muslim) areas, demonstrations spread to over 30 cities and towns across the federation.

Police used rubber bullets and tear gas against demonstrators in Sarajevo, where protesters set the presidency and cantonal buildings ablaze.

Both Croats and Bosnians protested in Mostar, a town associated with some of the bitterest fighting during the 1990s civil wars.

The uprising stunned the local ruling elites and the European Union (EU) establishment. The

governments of the cantons of Tuzla, Sarajevo, Una-Sana and Zenica-Doboj resigned.

Mass privatisation has led to massive de-industrialisation and dependence on imported goods and services.

But common grievances among protesters also include opposition to the entire ruling political elite and the corrupt government structures.

Government

The multi-layered system of government for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina arose from the 1995 Dayton Agreement following three years of war and 'ethnic cleansing' which saw over 100,000 people killed.

The 1992-1995 war was the last stage in the violent break-up of Yugoslavia and the restoration of capitalism.

In the decades after World War Two, Yugoslavia experienced economic development and a significant rise in living standards, albeit under a Stalinist system of rule by a parasitic bureaucratic elite over the state-owned economy.

For their own imperialist ends, western powers (German imperialism, in particular) helped provoke the three way civil war in Bosnia between Croats, Serbs and Bosnians (Muslims) and, along with Moscow, supported rival factions of the old elite competing to get their hands on wealth and power.

As the warring armies fought to a standstill, the US and Nato intervened to impose the Dayton Agreement, dividing Bosnia into the 'entities' of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (inhabited mainly by Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats), the Republika Srpska (Serb republic) and the Brcko District, which formally belongs to both entities.

Each entity is divided into cantons. The ten cantons each have a prime minister and a cabinet. But this complex system of government does not signify genuine democracy.

The EU High Representative, currently Vladimir Inzko, is invested with dictatorial powers, such as the power to remove public officials from office and to enforce binding government decisions.

What is, in effect, a Western neocolonial protectorate was indicated last week when Inzko threatened military intervention by the EU to end the mass protests.

'Ethno-centric' politics

Bosnia's complex power-sharing structure also sees the legitimising and institutionalising of ethnic-based politics.

The various "ethnic veto points" allow nationalist politicians to paralyse the federal government over many issues.

No official recognition is given to voters who may want genuine cross-ethnic, working class-based and socialist politics.

Yet the yearning for an alternative to right wing 'ethno-centric' politics is indicated by many of the slogans at the recent demonstrations. "I am hungry in three languages", declared one banner.

The bloated, bureaucratic, authoritarian, corrupt and inefficient governing apparatus is a hate target of the protesters.

The political elite from all parties are detested for having siphoned off billions of dollars meant for 'aid funds' and capital investment.

Although they cynically pit one ethnic group against another, the right-wing political elites agree on the need to impose neoliberal attacks against the population and on which EU accession for Bosnia is conditional.

The ruling parties of Bosnia Herzegovina have colluded with the EU to impose an IMF austerity programme on working people.

Five years of cuts have led to a cut in public sector pay, a freezing of budgets, a dramatic fall in consumer spending and a ballooning of public debt. Over 60% of those under 24 years are unemployed.

Now growing numbers of Bosnians have seen through the main parties' nationalist and ethnic smokescreen to their neo-liberal agenda.

In an attempt to play the ethnic card to stop the full force of the revolt reaching the Republika Srpska, its president, Milorad Dodik, describes the demonstrations as a Bosniak-Croat plot against Serbs.

But this has failed to prevent protests in Serb towns, such as Banja Luka, Brcko and Prijedor. Even the Bosnian Serb war veterans' association attacked Dodik's comments.

They accuse those in power of "attempting by any means necessary to preserve a state that is based on crime, corruption, nepotism, and on a horrendous education system whose consequences are already being felt".

The basis for cross-ethnic, class solidarity in Bosnia and throughout the Balkans can be gleaned from the slogans and demands put forward by protesters.

Hundreds attended a solidarity protest in Croatia's capital, Zagreb, where a banner read: "No to war between the people. No peace between classes!"

The 7 February 'Declaration by the Workers and Citizens of the Tuzla Canton' put forward radical demands that mark a clear rejection of the market economy.

They called for secure health insurance, the annulment of the privatisation programmes, the return of the factories to the workers, to put everything under the control of the public government and for a workers' wage for government representatives.

Limitations

Protesters have reportedly set up assemblies or plenaries throughout Bosnia, with the Tuzla Plenum even making appointments to local government.

Yet the revolt's largely spontaneous character and the acute lack of working class organisation and independent political leadership means there are serious limitations to the movement at this stage.

This can be seen by other demands put forward by the Tuzla protesters, such as the call for "the establishment of a technical government composed of expert, non-political, uncompromised members".

This may seem to protesters as a way of removing corrupt, self-serving politicians, but as recent "technical governments" in Italy and Greece showed, they were not neutral arbiters but fundamentally served the austerity demands of big business.

A 'non-party, technical' government in Bosnia would come under immense pressures from right-wing nationalist forces and the EU's pro-big business interests.

Given the lack of real workers' democracy under the former Yugoslavia, followed by the horrors of wars and capitalist restoration, it is to be expected that the workers' movement is very weak.

Still, workers, students and the jobless have no choice but to rely on their own self-organisation, building assemblies or councils of mass struggle that can democratically decide at local, regional and national levels, the next steps to win their goals.

United workers' action

The weapons available to the working class of Bosnia and across the region include strikes and general strikes.

Coordinated working class action in the Federation and Republika Srpska is needed to unite all workers and to cut across the poison of nationalism that the ruling elites will surely unleash to defend their interests.

A strong class appeal to the rank and file of the police can help neutralise state oppression.

A strong, united workers' movement would extend and develop the most progressive demands put forward today in Tuzla, Sarajevo and elsewhere, fighting for the immediate ending of the IMF austerity policies, the kicking out of the EU High Representative and an end to all imperialist meddling.

The building of a mass workers' party with socialist policies could offer a real alternative to all shades of reactionary nationalist parties and local gangster-capitalism.

In place of Bosnia's corrupt, ethnically-divisive government structures, an independent workers' movement would struggle for a genuine constituent assembly and a majority workers' government.

Bringing the privatised industries under democratic public ownership, as part of a planned economy under democratic workers' control and management, would greatly encourage working people across the Balkans to follow suit.

On this basis, working people from all ethnic and national backgrounds could democratically and peacefully decide their common future, as part of a free and equal socialist federation of the Balkans.

The mass protests of the last few weeks are the first important steps towards these goals.

Doncaster care workers vote for seven-day

strike

A Doncaster Unison member

Care UK workers in Doncaster have voted by over 90% for serious action against attacks on pay and conditions.

The Unison members have decided the action they want to take is a seven-day strike, with continuous action short of a strike, including withdrawal of goodwill.

They are now waiting for national authorisation. In the consultative ballot 118 votes were cast and 113 voted to strike. This was out of 167 workers who were balloted.

In September 2013 the tender for Doncaster's learning disability supported-living service was sold to the cheapest bidder, the Tory bedfellows and personal friends of Conservative health ministers everywhere, Care UK.

The learning disability service, previously part of the NHS, was Doncaster's flagship service with integration, individuality and inclusion; enriching the lives of its service users and providing staff with a job they could be proud of and proper training.

Now, service users with complex mental health needs are suffering as staff they have known for years are leaving in their droves out of fear of pay cuts.

In December, Care UK unveiled its plans to make the service more 'financially viable'. This means no enhanced pay for unsociable hours worked - an average of a £500 a month pay cut in real terms. There are other cuts to terms and conditions.

This proposal was overwhelmingly rejected by Unison members and a ballot for strike action was issued, the ballot came back in favour of industrial action.

Care UK then came back with the concessions they were willing to make in order to avoid a strike.

A whopping £1 an hour extra for night shifts and £2 an hour for weekends and bank holidays. In real terms an estimated average pay cut of only £440 a month! No wonder the results of the second ballot are nine-tenths in favour of action.

In the meantime Care UK has attempted to bypass the unions by individually contacting employees and offering to buy them out of their contracts for a one-off taxable payment which will be the financial difference between working for the NHS and working for Care UK.

Employees have been given a deadline of 21 March to accept this offer.

The company has said that unless an agreement is reached between themselves and the unions, on 23 March all employees previously on NHS contracts will be sacked and offered re-employment on Care UK's terms and conditions.

Action escalates in Glasgow

Glasgow Unison members

The Glasgow care workers strike action is growing stronger and more solid. After taking two 48-hour strikes in January nearly 400 Unison members involved completed a 72-hour strike over the Valentine's weekend.

At a mass meeting on 16 February workers unanimously voted to escalate their action and intend to take a further three 72-hour strikes starting in March.

The mood of the meeting was one of anger and determination. Strikers have been encouraged by the many letters of support they have received.

They feel that by clearly stating their intention to strike for a further three weekends they will send a message to management that they intend to fight this battle to a finish.

The Director of Social Work had attempted to by-pass the union by threatening to put all workers who did not sign up to attacks on terms and conditions on 45-day notice of termination of their contracts.

These attacks include pay cuts for more than 300 of the just over 500 staff. Workers have been moved onto 12-hour shifts from eight hours previously.

Pressure is growing on the Labour leadership of Glasgow city council. Glasgow trades council has written to all councillors accusing the council of anti-trade union tactics.

They have called for negotiations with Unison to ensure there are no cuts to the living standards of the workers.

Messages of support should be sent to enquiries@glasgowcityunison.co.uk Donations to the strike fund should be made out to Unison, Glasgow City Branch, 84 Bell Street, Glasgow G1

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Runcorn: Workers' solidarity scores victory

A Runcorn TPS worker

There was an unofficial walkout by construction workers at Runcorn thermal power station on 13 February in another dispute over safety issues on the site in north west England.

During the recent storms a section of cladding from a flue stack blew off on the neighbouring Ineos Chlor plant and the site was evacuated.

On returning to work the next day some workers refused to go onto the site due to concerns over site safety despite assurances from Keppel Segers (KS), the company in overall charge on the site.

A mass meeting was called at 10.30am and it was moved that we would cabin up for two hours with the reps to meet with management and reconvene the meeting for a report back.

At the second meeting we were told that there had been no discussions with KS management over the safety issues.

They said if we returned to normal working there would be no loss of monthly bonus for the workers who had gone to work at the start of shift but no pay for the two hours and there would be a meeting with the reps later in the day.

This was rejected out of hand by the workforce and it was moved that we withdraw labour and return the following day for a report back on negotiations.

At the meeting on Friday morning we were told that KS had agreed to review the safety policy and offered outline proposals to the reps.

However prior to the meeting, one of the supervisors let slip to me that the Permit to Work issuers, responsible for safety assessment on the site, would not take responsibility for the permits they were issuing, effectively making them worthless.

I reported this to the meeting and it was moved that we would return to site and cabin up again and claim pay for the day as we did not have a safe workplace, which we won.

Another example of how an intransigent management can be forced to move by workers' solidarity.

Newham primary school strike over new pay scheme

Bob Severn, East London Socialist Party

Teachers at Avenue Primary School in Newham, East London, took strike action on 12 February as the school has broken away from national pay agreements.

Tory education minister Michael Gove has allowed schools to set their own pay policy in order to cut teachers' pay. But schools can choose to keep to existing arrangements.

The HR committee (which consists of four governors including the chair of governors - a local authority appointed governor) agreed a new pay policy on behalf of the whole governing body. Despite the NUT's ongoing attempts, since September, to request that the governing body keep the existing pay scales without adding in half points, the chair of governors refused further talks with the union.

The new pay scheme has sixteen points on the scale instead of nine. This means that teachers could get a smaller pay rise for each year worked than in other schools. It makes it harder for teachers to show they should get an annual pay rise.

The teachers think that having to prove they are meeting targets for a pay rise will take them away from the important job of teaching.

National Union of Teachers executive member Martin Powell-Davies said: "The new points scheme is playing divide and rule, trying to put teachers against each other and putting more stress on observations. But working as a team, sticking together, teachers can stop what's wrong, like this pay plan."

Another two days of strike action is planned for the first week of March if the school does not back down.

Teachers welcomed the idea of standing Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition candidates in the 22 May local elections. Every council seat in Newham is currently occupied by a Labour Party member. Yet it seems, through Local Authority appointed governors, they are supporting

schools breaking away from the national pay scheme.

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Workplace news in brief

Council pay

The local government employers have scrapped the pay negotiations for 1.6 million workers until the new rate for the minimum wage is set in May.

The unions, Unite, Unison and GMB have put in a claim for a minimum increase of £1 an hour and a living wage for the lowest paid workers.

The employers are clearly using the poverty-level minimum wage to hold wages down. They want to use the likely pitiful rise in the minimum wage rate to resist any meaningful wage rise.

Only a well-organised battle, including strike action, is likely to push the employers to reach a pay settlement which will address poverty pay and compensate for the effective pay cuts council workers have endured over the last few years.

Yorkshire Ambulance

Unite members working for Yorkshire Ambulance Service Trust were on strike for five hours on 17 February in a dispute over shift patterns. The new longer shifts could mean workers working for ten hours without a meal break.

The Trust is refusing to negotiate with Unite, which it has derecognised. In a clear cost-cutting exercise the trust is also trying to introduce emergency care assistants who are being given only six weeks training, while paramedics have to undergo a two-year degree course.

RMT protest

Transport union RMT and the International Transport Federation protested again at Portsmouth Commercial docks on 18 February.

This is to expose the practice of ferry owners like Condor who employ non-EU workers on poverty pay rates of £2.35 an hour. Condor operates a ferry service between Portsmouth and the Channel Islands.

Not only does this exploit the workers concerned but it also allows the employers to drive down the wages and conditions of all seafarers.

Royal Opera House

Porters and cleaners at the Royal Opera House are being balloted for strike action over non-payment of wages owed.

The contractor who employs them, Mitie, was forced to start paying the London Living Wage of £8.80 an hour, after strike action and protests, but they have still not paid some wages owed from last October.

This situation has been exacerbated by the company's refusal to recognise the workers' union, IWGB.

Another contractor, Company of Cooks Ltd, is paying some of their workers £6.50 an hour on effective zero-hour contracts.

IWGB has put in a claim for the London Living Wage and proper contracts of employment for these workers.

Time to strike the bedroom tax a killer blow

Elaine Brunskill, Newcastle

Across Britain the implementation of the bedroom tax has created seething anger.

A survey by the National Housing Federation (NHF) shows that since its introduction last April, a staggering two thirds of homes affected by the policy have fallen into rent arrears.

One in seven families hit by the tax are being put under enormous stress as eviction risk letters drop onto their doormats and they face the possibility of losing their home.

The report also highlights that an estimated two thirds of the 413,000 people in England affected by the bedroom tax are disabled.

Yet, according to disability charity Papworth Trust, many disabled people have been refused emergency financial help, and are struggling to pay the tax by cutting back on food and household bills.

In Newcastle one woman told us that on a recent visit to her mother, who is affected by the bedroom tax, she was appalled to realise that her mother had no food in her cupboards!

Con-Dem ministers, living in their mansions, have said people facing the bedroom tax have the choice to move into a smaller home or pay.

This is a lie! There are not enough homes with fewer bedrooms for people to move into.

A BBC news report revealed that housing estates across the country now have larger family homes lying empty because tenants in receipt of housing benefit cannot afford to move into them. The boarded up houses are dragging down housing estates.

Local residents in Carlisle who want to move into smaller properties were angered when single bedroomed flats were demolished, to be replaced by two and three bedroomed houses. At the local anti-bedroom tax meeting they asked: "Where can we go now?"

The defeat of the bedroom tax in Scotland has given a welcome boost to campaigners in England and Wales.

This is coupled with the revelation that a loophole in the government's welfare reforms means that the bedroom tax does not apply to tenants who have lived in the same property for more than 17 years.

It has been estimated that around 50,000 people have been wrongly held liable by this shambles. This loophole is causing havoc as it seems most councils will not have kept records dating back to 1996.

Another loophole has been highlighted by the Bolton Upper Tribunal which has judged that a bedroom is "a room furnished with a bed or used for sleeping in".

So if the room is used for another purpose, such as for storage, it should not be subject to the bedroom tax.

Loopholes such as these are to be welcomed, and appeals should be lodged. However, the Con-Dems will undoubtedly attempt to rectify these glitches with new regulations.

It is therefore imperative to step up the campaign. Alongside public meetings and protests, local anti-bedroom tax groups should consider standing in May's council elections as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC).

The Con-Dem government has been put on the backfoot. Now is the time to strike a killer blow on the hated bedroom tax.

Service users "terrified" by cuts in Worcester

Dave Griffiths

80 people whistled, rattled and jeered at a midday protest as Worcestershire county council voted to cut £98 million of services.

Support services are to be cut from £15 million to a shocking £6.5 million.

Ukip support for the Tory policy helped ensure the cuts plan was voted through despite a brave pre-debate appeal from women users of the support service.

Trades unionists from unions representing council workers - Unite, Unison and GMB - joined the young women protesters who have set up a 'Save Our Support' campaign.

Support for older people is to be cut from £7 million to £3 million, domestic abuse support from £900,000 to £460,000, homelessness support from £1.12 million to £600,000 and supported accommodation for families and young people from £1.88 million to £900,000.

Offenders services were completely removed and physical disability support reduced from £963,000 to £308,000. Mental health and substance abuse services were also slashed.

This was "terrifying" to these women who have managed recently to turn their and their children's lives around only because of the support they have received.

A social worker told Socialist Party members that: "All of us are more concerned for service users than our jobs."

Kevin Greenway of the civil service union PCS gave his support to the protesters and spoke of united action against the government and Socialist Party member Pete McNally was cheered when he spoke of the cowardice "of local councillors passing on cuts to local people who should instead be passing onto the government what we need."

The council may have brutally ignored the pleas from the women campaigners, but they cannot be ignored if a mass campaign of opposition is built.

Marching to save children's centres in Canterbury

Dave Semple, East Kent Socialist Party

Kent socialists, trade unionists and parents from the Save Kent Children's Centres campaign staged a 70-strong march through the centre of Canterbury on Saturday 15th February in protest at the closure of 12 children's centres by the Tory county council.

Following two previous demonstrations and thousands of names on a petition, Kent county council retreated from its initial proposal of closing 23 children's centres. The protests of parents, underpinned and organised by socialists in the trade unions, forced a backtrack on 11 centres.

In the last week, however, up to 300 staff at the children's centres have been told that they will have to re-apply for their jobs, as opening hours of centres are reduced and the council seeks to strip out resources. These resources include fully qualified teachers at each centre.

Rally speeches

Saturday's march culminated in a rally addressed by David Lloyd from the Unison branch responsible for the workers in these centres. He slammed Kent county council for ignoring its own procedures and failing to heed a parents' petition to refer the decisions on closures back to the full council. Parents and workers are under no illusion that the full council would decide differently, but it would give more space to build the campaign against all closures.

During the rally, local library campaigners from Strood and Whitstable spoke about the need to

link up the campaigns. Support was voiced from every quarter of the room for a campaign against all cuts. Mike Sargent from the RMT executive and Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) steering committee received hearty applause when he demanded election candidates who are accountable, unlike any of the main parties.

Unison plans

Though Unison is to debate holding an indicative ballot for strike action in the coming months, the Tories have now pushed through this year's budget. Managers have been bullying staff to keep them from taking leaflets when going to work, let alone getting involved in the campaign.

The Unison branch committee, working with the NUT and ATL, who represent teachers working in the centres, have restricted themselves to lobbying. To win a ballot, they would have to lay out a detailed plan of action to defend the 600 jobs at risk over the next three years and link up with other unions county wide.

Members of the Socialist Party have been pushing exactly this option - and it would be rendered even more powerful by coupling it to running election candidates who will vote against all cuts. Virtually everyone who addressed the rally - far beyond the Socialist Party members or known TUSC supporters present - said something similar about backing anti-cuts candidates.

Although there were a few Labour Party activists and a smattering of Greens present, it was clear that neither the Greens nor Labour had mobilised their members. In Canterbury alone, Labour has 400 members. A Green candidate was heard boasting that the Greens have several hundred also. The most either could muster was to describe the emailing of Sure Start redundancies as "insensitive".

TUSC had by far the most visible presence on the demonstration and it was clear from the rally that it correctly articulated the demands of the local activists. The mood is there for a political alternative to austerity, even in the heartlands of Tory Britain. It is our responsibility to consistently provide the answers for which they are searching, and to build their confidence in TUSC.

Saturday's demonstration in Canterbury was a strong step in this direction.

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 17 February 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Warrington anti-cuts councillor exposes devastating cuts plans

Warrington councillor Kevin Bennett, who was suspended from the council Labour group for voting against the Warrington borough council (WBC) budget cuts in 2013 is still awaiting confirmation from the Labour group on when he will be allowed to return.

Councillor Bennett said in a press release that the budget for the next financial year which includes up to 75 job losses and service 'redesigns' to help save money has included an investment for the crazy golf course at Walton Hall Gardens, when council tax looks set to rise by 1.98% as the council decided not to take on government funding to pay for a freeze.

In the meantime he has been representing his ward (Fairfield and Howley) and trying to get a grasp of how devastating this year's budget cuts will be. As reported in the local Guardian on 13th February 2014, the council unions are 'very anxious' about the 46 jobs under threat.

Councillor Bennett said:

After finally obtaining some of the financial information on this year's budget that will be put to full council on 3rd March 2014, I have asked for my questions to be answered. The public consultation was a 'sham', it was sent out with very limited information and didn't outline what cuts would need to be made.

As I understand it, adult social care will be 'farmed out' to a social enterprise company, which in my view would be a risk as the company is completely untested. There has been no explanation of how this will save money, therefore I can only assume that it will be by cutting wages and staff. I have asked the question 'why can't it be kept in-house'?

According to the information I've received, WBC have already closed three day-care centres, reduced the overall manager numbers by a third, and restructured and reduced the team size for respite services for learning disabilities.

The council is also cutting direct payments to adult social care recipients, these cuts don't sound like a lot of money but they will be devastating for the people involved.

Some of the savings these cuts and others are proposed to make are miniscule in comparison to the 2013/14 forecasted borrowing figure to fund the capital programme of almost £500 million and at the same time WBC has millions of pounds from investments sat in the bank. Throughout Warrington there are still many residents who are in arrears with their council tax because of the changes to the welfare system brought in by this government; we need to help these people.

WBC has 'dipped' into its reserves this year, which goes to show that reserves can be used to mitigate the cuts. I was made to feel like an outcast for even suggesting such a thing. Using reserves was also suggested by the present mayor, councillor Peter Carey, who in 2010 stated in a newsletter, edited by councillor Hitesh Patel, when talking about the £millions of reserves: 'Could this money not be used to prevent the drastic cuts the LibDem-Tory coalition running the council seems hell-bent on pushing through'.

I am hoping to get meaningful answers to these and many other questions regarding the 'privatisation' of our services.

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Councils pass on Tory pain

Peter Redfarn, Lewisham TUSC

Lewisham Labour mayor Steve Bullock's council policy is cuts, cuts and more cuts. There have already been £82 million of them, £17 million are planned after May's council election.

He wants at least another £85 million, stretching into 2018 whoever wins the general election.

In December Bullock and his cabinet decided further cuts and charge increases. Many cuts were aimed at children.

A lobby by the union Unite forced £300,000 of cuts in the School Attendance and Welfare (truancy) Service, plus the £200,000 previously agreed, to be "deferred" but not cancelled.

The mayor reduced the number of recycling rounds to eight from nine, eliminating four jobs. This decision was referred back but is likely to go ahead unless the unions put up a fight.

The rent for a single bed space will rise 25% to £150 a week, and to £190 a week for three bed spaces.

These are for homeless people at the top of the waiting list, and don't include gas, electricity and water.

Lewisham Homes talks about a property 'ladder', but for Lewisham people it is more like a snake.

The 2011 census shows 24.3% of Lewisham households rent privately, up from 14.3% in 2001. Meanwhile homeowners went down from 15.4% to 14.9%, mortgage payers from 33.1% to 27.5% and council tenants from 26.6% to 16.6%.

The mayor approved putting the out-of-hours emergency service out to tender, reckoning to save £100,000 a year.

But direct labour would do a better job cheaper. One company mentioned is Capita whose boss earns £900,000 a year, and which has a proven record of incompetence.

The boss of Mitie, which is refurbishing homes in Lewisham, is paid over £1 million a year.

There's no need to attack public services - taking all services back in-house would save millions of pounds, for example.

Fight the cuts!

Medway council will "rue the day" they attacked our library

Sue Berry

Over 60 people attended a public meeting in Strood, one of the Medway towns in Kent, on 15 February to discuss the next moves in a grassroots campaign to save the local library.

Medway council has ignored a 5,000-name petition and brushed aside large protests outside two council meetings.

Faced with this intransigence, local campaigners, with Socialist Party members involved, have pledged to step up their public profile through protests, pickets and a demonstration through the towns.

Addressing the packed meeting, Marion Shoard, writer and lecturer, said: "We have a superb library. Losing the library and Strood Community Project is a double act of vandalism.

"The council have misled us and are just not listening." She urged residents to make their voices heard.

Kim West, manager of the Strood Community Project, which has now been evicted from the High Street to make way for a downsized and relocated 'community hub', said: "This decision has been rushed through with no public consultation.

An outstanding charity shop with a footfall of over 300 people a day, providing support for vulnerable people, has been brushed aside, in favour of the policy to develop community hubs. This amounts to cuts in frontline services."

A steering committee was set up to coordinate future action. 30 protesters picketed the council on 17 February and a lobby is planned of the council's budget setting meeting on 20 February at 6.30pm at the St George's Centre, Chatham.

Medway Council will rue the day they decided to ignore 5,000 local residents. Public libraries were created as centres of recreation and learning, not as secondary outlets for downgraded and overstretched council services.

Fast Food Rights day of action

In Newcastle we had an excellent Fast Food Rights day of action on 15 February. We staged a protest outside McDonalds which included activists from Youth Fight for Jobs, the bakers union BFAWU, the Socialist Party and others.

Chanting could be heard across Northumberland Road: "When they say supersize, we fight back and unionise".

We had speeches denouncing the use of zero-hour contracts and calling for unionisation of the fastfood industry to stop bullying management and for decent pay and conditions. We went into McDonalds, Burger King and Costa Coffee giving out leaflets.

Our action was energetic and received wide support. Many people who approached us had either been on a zero-hour contract or knew someone who was and many signed up to the campaign.

We only found opposition from management in McDonalds who called the police. When one policeman turned up he said everything was fine and we could continue.

This is just the first day of a big campaign in the north east and we are planning to have a similar sort of demo outside different fastfood restaurants regularly.

Paul Phillips

Stop the deportation of Jermaine Strachen

A young father is facing deportation because he lost his own father in a hit and run in 2004.

Jermaine Strachen was 14 at the time of his father's death and was dependent on his father (a British citizen) for his immigration status in the UK.

Now 26 he faces deportation leaving his remaining family including a six year old son behind.

Since his father's death Jermaine has been subject to reporting conditions, which he has complied with.

Ruth Cashman, joint secretary of Lambeth Unison stated: "It defies belief that the Home Office would compound the Strachan family's tragedy by deporting Jermaine.

"Jermaine lost his father at 14 and his six year old son Maliki also faces growing up without his father.

"We consider this a gross injustice and believe Jermaine Strachan should remain in the UK with his family and should be given full British Citizenship."

- Jermaine's reference number is S793967 and he is currently detained at Dover Immigration Centre: Unison is calling upon local people to send messages of support to Jermaine's family (hazel.strachan1@hotmail.co.uk) and letter of protest to his local MP, Steve Reed (steve.reed.mp@parliament.uk) and the Home Office (UKBApublicenquiries@UKBA.gsi.gov.uk)

Successful Socialist Party conferences prepare for the year ahead

Wales

Around 50 Socialist Party Wales members from all parts of the country held a very successful annual conference in Cardiff on 16 February.

Socialist Party deputy general secretary Hannah Sell gave an inspirational opening speech outlining the impact of the economic crisis in Britain and the inevitability of a fightback by the working class.

The discussion then highlighted the key role our members are playing in the trade union movement in Wales.

Members in Unison are battling against the vicious cuts being implemented by Labour-led councils with Carmarthenshire Unison branch pointing the way forward by fighting for a 'no-cuts budget'.

Our members in the civil servants union PCS continue to fly the flag of resistance despite fighting on their own in many instances because of the failure of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to initiate the popular demand for a one-day general strike.

Steven Skelly, executive member for Wales and the South West in the transport union RMT, brought greetings to the conference.

He re-emphasised the importance of industrial action against class enemies such as Tory London Mayor, Boris Johnson, who is licking his wounds after being forced to step back from his attacks on London underground workers.

Further action by RMT members may be necessary but it is a lesson and inspiration to millions of workers that militant action can stop these attacks.

Ross Saunders introduced the party building session by recording our successes in Wales over the past year and also explaining the methods and determination necessary to recruit more new members to our party.

Our young student members reported their initiatives in building Socialist Students in the colleges and universities in Wales.

Our finance organisers are launching the 2014 subs campaign to increase our resources to help us raise socialist strategies in the anti-cuts campaigns and our youth and trade union activities.

Our 2014 Socialist Party Wales conference was enthusiastic and brimming with confidence for the coming year.

This was reflected in the excellent fighting fund appeal which raised £811 as well as one visitor signing up to join at the end of conference.

Alec Thraves

East Midlands

East Midlands Socialist Party held a successful regional conference with 30 members in attendance and some excellent political discussion.

A slideshow video at the beginning of the day reminded us of the vast amount of activity we have been involved in over the last year - from standing in elections and supporting picket lines to building support in the universities and campaigning against zero-hour contracts.

Rob Williams, from the Socialist Party executive committee, outlined prospects for struggle in Britain and there were contributions from the floor about the situation facing young people and the horrific cuts expected this year in local government.

We had workshops on whether political parties are relevant to young people, how we can help organise in the workplace, what makes a successful Socialist Party meeting and who should write for the Socialist (eds: everyone!).

The conference inspired our members, reflected in a fighting fund appeal raising over £330. The launch of a subs campaign resulted in a few members immediately agreeing to increase their financial commitment to the Socialist Party.

Becci Heagney

Working nights is bad for your health

A nurse

For years scientists and trade unions have compiled a growing body of evidence, warning of the dangers of night shifts.

Diabetes, heart disease and cancers are commonly associated side effects, with some estimating night shifts can take up to five years off a worker's life.

Of course some services have to be running 24 hours a day. People do not get sick, have fires or experience crime exclusively within office hours.

However, the sacrifice made to their health by those key workers must be properly compensated.

A measly time-plus-a-third for nurses, midwives and paramedics who work a Saturday night shift is an insult to NHS workers, consistently putting patients' health and wellbeing ahead of their own.

In the NHS and other emergency and care services, 24-hour cover is a necessity. However, in many other workplaces, night working is used as a way of squeezing ever more profit out of staff, by implementing permanent business hours, regardless of the cost to workers' health.

Many workers feel they have no choice but to do nights. Poverty pay, bullying bosses and lack of affordable childcare during the day mean that for many, night shifts are the only way they can bear the increasing cost of living.

The profit motive means that many employers are happy to exploit these conditions, while lining their own pockets at the same time! It's the bosses' low pay, long hours, anti-worker agenda that creates a 'willing' pool of night staff.

It's the bosses, shareholders and private backers who are the main beneficiaries of night working, yet it's night workers who pay the real price.

Although the bosses would argue they cannot afford to pay staff more just for working at night, the profits generated through 24-hour production should be divided up between those who are actually doing the work.

In the past, workers have taken action to demand better pay and in some cases, abolition of night work.

The trade unions need to launch a serious, coordinated campaign of action around not just night shift pay but combatting the reasons many workers feel they have to work nights.

- Proper compensation for having to work unsocial hours
- An end to non-essential night working and no job cuts

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to the 'living wage', as an immediate step towards £10 an hour
 - For pay increases matching the increased cost of living for all workers
 - Free childcare
-

Cuts make the job impossible

A police shift worker

I work for the police as a call handler. I have to work shift patterns that include nights. We provide a service over 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. But we only get a 20% shift allowance, which my work colleagues feel is inadequate.

We are always tired by the time the night shifts come around as we have already completed four ten-hour shifts and know that the night shifts are the busiest and bring the most difficult calls.

My last night shift started at 10pm on Saturday night and ended at 7am the following Sunday morning. I usually try to lie in as late as possible on the day of my first night shift so that I am not so tired. This is not always possible. This time emergency road works kept me awake.

I arrived at work and I saw on the monitors that calls were already 'stacking'. This is when a high number of calls are coming in with not enough staff to answer them immediately. There were a lot of people waiting and some were 999 calls.

For the first four hours I handled mainly 999 calls. This is unusual and means that non emergency 101 calls were not being answered and a high number abandoned by the callers. Most of these callers are trying to report low level crime and anti-social behaviour.

After the first four hours I was speaking to people saying they called earlier in the evening but abandoned the call.

The issue was still going on so they called back to report it again. We all received a lot of abuse from angry callers, but who could blame them?

The busy period meant none of us were able to get a 'screen break'. We are told by the Health and Safety Executive to take a minimum break of five minutes every hour.

But if you take 'too many' trips away from your desk, a supervisor is quick to jump on you.

They say: "If you want a screen break stay sitting at your desk and look at the far wall for a bit".

Some calls are mundane and frustrating to deal with but others are harrowing and distressing to listen to and very hard to handle.

When we handle such a call there is a 'quiet room' set aside from the department that we can retreat to in order to gather ourselves.

On my last night shift I saw an upset colleague, who had just handled a very violent domestic incident, told to return to her work station as it was too busy to be 'sat out here'.

My shift ended with the last couple of hours spent talking predominantly to the growing amount of vulnerable people or callers with mental health conditions.

Again, these calls can be very difficult to deal with. I have had two people commit suicide on the phone with me in the past and I am always anxious and desperate to help them.

By the time I went home I was so tired I drove with the window open so the cold air would keep me from falling asleep at the wheel.

Cuts have meant a large number of people have lost their jobs, some with a vast amount of experience and knowledge.

In my opinion, it has left the organisation with too few people, some who are less able and prepared to deal with the challenges of the job.

We are experiencing a peak in calls from vulnerable people with mental health issues, drug use problems, among other things.

The police are expected to pick up the pieces but, with the latest round of cuts, this will be impossible.

Cycling deaths must be stopped

Britain's cyclists have seen another bad week for safety with recent fatalities including two cyclists killed by a car being chased by the police.

The police responded to the last surge in fatalities in London cycling by ordering a

clampdown on cyclists with officers being ordered to fine at least ten cyclists a month. Nick Auvache investigates

Cycling is a healthy form of exercise and essential for many people to travel to work, college and school.

Sometimes, however, cycling can be dangerous. Last November six cyclists died in two weeks on London's streets.

Boris Johnson, London's Tory Mayor, claims cycling is very safe and there is little he can do to reduce deaths and accidents on our streets.

But, the Economist says, 118 cycling deaths were registered in 2013, the highest figure since 2007.

In London cycling accidents represented 22% of road casualties in 2012, up from 10% in 2006. In 2012 Holland saw only 22 deaths for every billion cycle miles while in the UK there were 38 deaths.

Johnson, though, saves his sympathy for the business community, who he claims, could be disadvantaged by the increasingly popular demand for restricting the movement of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) in London, especially during peak hours.

Johnson said the real problem was cyclists wearing headphones. His fellow Tory, Lord James, claimed that cyclists were "longing for drivers to run them down"!

But measures can and should be taken to make roads safer, especially for cyclists. Johnson opposes restricting HGVs' movement in city centres now but brought in similar restrictions when it suited him during the Olympics.

Johnson's "war on cyclists" tries to deflect attention away from his disastrous cycling plans which, says London Assembly Member Darren Johnson, contributed significantly to the recent "cull" of cyclists in London.

Rachel Aldred, a Westminster University planning expert, said that poor planning often promotes dangerous behaviour by cyclists.

Blaming cyclists for recent accidents is a blatant attempt to put business profits before safety. More cycle lanes should be built with physical barriers protecting them from other traffic and HGVs should be restricted.

We also need massive investment in public transport to improve quality and reduce the costs. Money should be 'no object'.

This too would make the roads safer for all users. However these demands will need to be taken up not just by individual cyclists but also by the workers' movement.

'Criminal' waste and 'legal' waste

Jane Smith

A lot of food is wasted in Britain. At farms, 'wonky' vegetables are rejected; at warehouses huge amounts of packaged foods are discarded because of split packets or minor blemishes.

At supermarkets food is thrown out after its sell-by date and at home most of us throw away some of the food we buy.

The report 'Global Food: Waste not, want not' suggests as much as half of the world's food is wasted.

Up to 30% of vegetables in the UK are not harvested because of their physical appearance. Half the food bought in Europe and the US is thrown away.

The big supermarkets are a key part in this wasteful process. Last October Tesco announced it would provide, with food redistribution charity FareShare, the equivalent of seven million meals a year.

FareShare distributes surplus food from retailers and manufacturers to vulnerable people such as homeless or unemployed people.

But this step shows how broken the system is. No properly managed system should produce that much waste - particularly when so many people are going hungry. It also only addresses waste at supermarket distribution warehouses.

Meanwhile people faced prosecution for diverting waste at the supermarket stage. Paul Day was charged recently under the 1824 Vagrancy Act for taking food from a skip behind an Iceland store in London.

The Crown Prosecution Service originally said: "We feel there is significant public interest in prosecuting these individuals" but later dropped all charges.

Redistribution

Disgusted by the sheer waste, I couldn't let perfectly good food go to landfill. With some others I regularly used to visit supermarket bins, coming home with bags full of food. Often we froze what we couldn't eat or redistributed it to people we knew needed it.

Some days there was so much food, we had to go back for second loads. One weekend we found a skip full of potatoes (around 1.5 tonnes).

Potatoes can, if stored correctly, last for months. But these were wrapped in plastic with a 'best before' date on the packaging so were thrown out.

To me, this waste is more criminal than anyone taking those potatoes from skips and eating them. All Paul Day and his friends did was go into bins to try and eat, also reducing landfill.

Why were Paul and his friends thought worth prosecuting? Do we want a system that produces tonnes of waste but criminalises those who reduce that waste?

Campaign against "Lobbying Bill"

Kevin Parslow

The Transparency of Lobbying, Third Party Funding and Trade Union Administration Bill (Lobbying Bill) will become law shortly.

Its main provisions contain big attacks on democratic rights and the independence of trade unions.

What the Bill won't do is curb corporate lobbyists' activities or their ability to give gifts and 'donations' to influence government policy.

All lobbyists will have to do is sign the proposed 'Register of Consultant Lobbyists'.

Originally charities and campaigning organisations would have seen their ability to spend money on political objectives in the year before a general election severely curtailed to just £5,000 before they would have to be registered with the Electoral Commission! After widespread criticism by charities and campaign groups, government ministers amended the bill to raise the limit to £20,000 in England and from £5,000 to £10,000 in the rest of the UK.

Even Labour shadow cabinet member Angela Eagle claimed this legislation "seeks to silence critics of the government in the run-up to the general election, while letting vested interests operate out of sight" and was "an object lesson in how not to legislate".

Trade unions' activities were included in the Bill following the media and political establishment attacks on Unite's political campaign in Falkirk to participate democratically in selecting a Labour parliamentary candidate.

Unions' membership records will be open to inspection at any time by the government-appointed Trade Union Certification Officer.

This will jeopardise data protection and the independence of trade unions. Already, unions have to provide copious details to employers of workers balloting for strike action.

And what safeguards are there to prevent bosses getting details of trade unionists and add names to blacklists?

Unfortunately, trade unions did little more than lobby MPs and peers to oppose the Bill. No mass demos were called in Westminster to mobilise opposition.

Unions should consider non-cooperation with this Act. In the 1970s, most unions refused to register with the National Industrial Relations Court.

After the victory of the Pentonville dockers in 1972 following a mass movement and the threat of a general strike, the Court fell into disuse.

Even though unions are numerically weaker now than in the 1970s, they still have tremendous social weight. A mass campaign should be launched to scrap the provisions of this pernicious legislation.

<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/18175>