

Pay us a living wage now!

A local government worker, Yorkshire

The Low Pay Commission has just recommended a 3% increase in the minimum wage from 1 October. This is a pathetic 19p an hour or a loaf of bread more on an eight-hour shift or a pack of nappies more for a 40-hour week.

This is an insult to the families who over the last five years have seen the cost of the weekly food bill rocket by 24%, energy costs by 39%, public transport by 30% and social housing rents by 26% on average.

Even worse, young workers aged 18-20 stand to get only a 2% increase, taking their hourly wage to £5.13 - for 16-17 year olds the hourly wage will be £3.79.

With payday loans and food banks now a way of life for families up and down the country the gap between the end of the wages and the end of the month is now weeks rather than days.

Parents are skipping meals to make food go round. Rising numbers of children are going to school without breakfast.

This not only causes suffering now but malnourishment is storing up health problems for the future.

This pitiful increase, the first above inflation rise since the start of the financial crisis in 2008, is an insult to these families and the army of working poor without full-time opportunities, permanent contracts or decent terms and conditions.

Meanwhile those of us working in local government on poverty wages as catering staff, cleaners, teaching assistants and librarians see our unions stalling on pushing our pay claim.

Our union leadership have the laughable hope that this rise in the minimum wage will take the pressure off our stretched budgets and spiralling costs of living.

We need to ballot now for strike action to win our pay claim - and we should strike with the teachers on 26 March.

We all know only too well that neither this government nor, it is patently clear, the next, will give anything away to us without a fight.

The TUC, rather than just welcoming this increase, should be mobilising the unions for a coordinated fight, including general strike action, against poverty and cuts.

We need to be able to fight for decent living standards for ourselves and our families. We should declare war on this millionaire government and build a new mass party for the millions.

The Socialist Party says:

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to the 'living wage' rate of £7.65 an hour or £8.80 in London, as an immediate step towards £10 an hour for all
- All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one of employment
- An immediate 50% increase in the state retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension for all
- Reject 'workfare' and end zero-hour contracts. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion
- Share out the work. A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay

Donate to the Socialist Party

We are appealing to all our members and supporters to donate to the Socialist Party's Congress 2014 fighting fund appeal.

Hundreds of Socialist Party members will be coming together from every corner of England and Wales to discuss the latest political developments in Britain and worldwide.

We need the resources to meet all the challenges ahead and to maintain our ability to offer people an anti-austerity alternative.

Can you help? Can you make a donation of £5, £10, £50 or £100 or more? Every donation makes a difference and we can promise that every penny will go towards building support for socialist ideas.

Phone 020 8988 8762 to make a donation or visit www.socialistparty.org.uk/donate

Editorial from the Socialist issue 801

Need for new mass workers' party is undeniable

After a conference that lasted just two hours... it was gone! Labour's Saturday 1 March special conference actually took place in the very constituency where Kier Hardie, the first Independent Labour Member of Parliament, was first elected in 1892.

But by adopting the Collins Review, Labour effectively ended any lingering pretence of an organised trade union presence in the party that the unions created over a century ago.

But union members will be exasperated at the apparently relentless denial of the union leaders at what Collins represents. Incredibly, because of their support for Collins, there was bigger opposition among delegates from the threadbare constituency section than the unions!

Saturday's conference is the end of a process of transforming Labour into yet another mainstream pro-market party that started with Kinnock expelling Militant, Smith bringing in 'one member one vote' and Blair ditching the socialist Clause 4.

Tame party

The Labour leadership wants to finally cut off all avenues for internal opposition should they come to government, even from the tame party that now exists.

We've already had three years of 'Town Hall' Milibands and Balls passing on brutal Con-Dem cuts, while disciplining the few Labour councillors prepared to resist.

It also cannot be separated from Miliband shamefully calling in the police to undemocratically undermine the Falkirk parliamentary selection contest because Unite had been successful in recruiting new members to the party - the party it donates £3 million a year to! Len McCluskey reportedly got a rousing reception from delegates when he called for support for sacked Ineos convenor Stevie Deans. They had, however, also given a standing ovation to Miliband.

But the starting point for Stevie's dismissal was Miliband's attack on him at Falkirk where he was the constituency chair! Scandalously, Stevie's fellow convenor Mark Lyons, the national vice-chair of Unite has also now been sacked.

Yet Len can say: "My union was one of the first to embrace the principle of reform when Ed Miliband proposed it last summer..."

GMB leader Paul Kenny, who last autumn was standing out in opposition to Miliband said: "My union will be supporting these proposals wholeheartedly... trying our damndest to make them work."

And in an article entitled, 'We are grabbing this opportunity with both hands', Unite's political director Jennie Formby promises: "The hard work begins now."

"During the course of the five year transition proposed by Collins, Unite will be striving to persuade our members that there is a place for them in the Labour party."

What is this based on? Jennie writes: "People want a manifesto that gives expression to their hopes and offers real change to build a strong economy and a fairer society."

"So Ed, an appeal - release your inner radical, tell us more about how you will deliver the jobs, homes and hope our country needs so we really can persuade the 6.4 million trade unionists, the ordinary men and women who are the backbone of our country, that Labour is their party."

Jennie Formby's article only brought exasperation from Unite members who reflect many members' feelings: "It's no longer 'our party'."

Ordinary members have little say over policy. The elite do as they please, as happened in the many stitch-ups for safe parliamentary seats and as happened at Falkirk... Policy shouldn't be a matter of pleading with Ed to release his 'inner radical'."

Accept austerity

As the Socialist has pointed out many times, both Eds have already told us that they accept Tory austerity - and capitalism! The day after the special conference, New Labour education spokesman Tristram Hunt was on BBC confirming that Labour will retain Michael Gove's schools policies such as Free Schools and accelerated academisation: "I don't think you want to waste political energy by undoing reforms that, in certain situations, build rather successfully on Labour policy."

It is also revealing that Tony Blair praised Miliband and even 'Dr Death' David Owen, the key traitor who left Labour to set up the SDP, has publicly announced a financial donation to Labour precisely because Collins was passed - by your friends will you be known!

A new party based on the unions, with their resources on an unashamedly fighting anti-cuts programme could absolutely transform UK politics.

Even in the short term it would have more effect on Labour policies than the capitulation by the union leaders at this conference.

As Hunt's comments shows, all that has been achieved is to embolden the most right-wing elements in Labour.

Instead of wasting yet more members' subs on trying to convince them to join pro-austerity Labour, many union activists understand that there now has to be a debate and discussion about how a new mass party can be formed that stands full square against austerity and for trade union rights.

There would be outrage from members if their leaders bow to pressure and reduce the affiliation they donate to Labour yet merely give it through the backdoor in donations.

The great majority of the union leaders complied with Collins because they are afraid to draw the necessary conclusions

from what these changes mean.

They should look to France where Miliband's equivalent, François Hollande has pursued vicious austerity.

He has disappointed the working class completely and is officially the most unpopular president in the history of the fifth republic.

In the US the unions have funded Obama and the Democrats but significant sections are starting to work with the left, including Socialist Alternative, in the fight for a \$15 an hour minimum wage.

And they should look to South Africa where the working class in struggle is drawing conclusions and taking important steps in building a new mass political voice.

Here the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition is planning the biggest left of Labour stand in generations and already involves the RMT and key trade union fighters. Join the fight for a working class political voice by getting involved today.

- www.tusc.org.uk

Government condemns millions to housing misery

Meanwhile fat cat landlords cream the cash

Paul Kershaw

Since the global financial crash of 2007-8 the lack of affordable housing has become increasingly acute for 'the 99%', particularly shattering the lives of young people and the poor with a relentless cruelty.

That is true internationally, in Europe and the US as well as the UK. Through this housing disaster workers are being made to pay for the capitalists' crisis.

The number of households forced into the expensive and insecure private rented sector overtook those in social housing (housing association and council housing) for the first time last year according to the 2014 English Housing survey. The same survey shows 9.3% of private rented homes suffer from damp.

Private rents have rocketed, forcing people into overcrowded conditions and making the prospect of saving enough for a deposit to buy a house ever more remote.

Average monthly rental costs across Britain are on track to climb above £1,000 this year, according to property firm 'Move With Us'.

Prices boom

In December, official figures showed that the average UK house price had for the first time risen above £250,000; about ten times median income and London house prices jumped 12.3% on average last year.

The boom has broadened out beyond London, with prices up in more than half the country for the first time in ten years, according to data from property researchers Hometrack.

The government has given prices a deliberate boost through its cynically misnamed 'Help to Buy' initiative.

Of course rising prices do not help people buy. In reality they want to boost house prices and please established home owning Tory voters.

At the start of the world financial crash the bursting housing bubble started the collapse. No wonder even bankers have condemned this policy, warning of a further bubble.

House prices multiplied six times between 1983 and 2007 and land prices rose a startling 16 times in the same period; it is easy for landowners to make money doing nothing.

This, rather than 'red tape' explains large 'land banks' where, despite planning permission, homes are not built.

Home ownership has fallen to its lowest level for 25 years and the English Housing survey shows that four in ten private renters see no prospect of ever owning a home.

The Joseph Rowntree Trust estimates that the number of people in their 20s with a mortgage will halve in the next five years.

In the past private renting in Britain was seen as a temporary stage with the dream of owning your own home at the end. That dream is now in ruins.

Building council housing has all but ceased since the 1980s and the infamous Tory 'right to buy' scheme continues to reduce the stock.

The number of relatively cheap, social rent homes has dropped by around a quarter in the last ten years.

In London, over 271,000 council homes have been sold off since 1980. More than a third of them are rented out by private landlords.

Housing Associations are building, but with disappearing grants and higher rents. The new category of social 'affordable rent' may be cheaper than private renting but is actually often unaffordable; far more expensive than 'social rents'.

Rent controls

The distinction between housing associations and private landlords is collapsing as associations behave more like commercial corporations and private landlords can now access grant money.

The new 'social' arm of Grainger, the UK's largest listed residential landlord, moved its first tenants into a development in Berewood, Hampshire last month.

High rents charged by private landlords, combined with the growth of low pay explain the rising housing benefit bill.

What a scandal that TV programmes such as Benefit Street try to direct the blame on tenants and benefit claimants.

Even some Labour politicians are now toying with some form of rent control. David Lammy, seen as a possible candidate for London Mayor, says he is considering it.

He is anxious to assure that he isn't thinking of the rent control introduced under the pressure of the workers' movement during World War One.

Perfectly accurately he points out that Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany accepts the need for a form of rent control.

He assures us he wouldn't want to interfere with landlords' profits and wants investigations before action. But the housing emergency is a result of profit oriented policies over decades.

The boom in private landlordism dates from the Thatcher government's 1988 housing act which cut security for private renters and removed rent control for new lets. That legislation is still on the statute books.

The housing emergency should be addressed by immediately reintroducing rent control which would not need new primary legislation.

When rents were deregulated the Tory housing minister was challenged about the impact of rising rents; he did not deny rents would go up but said that housing benefit would 'take the strain' - in reality increased profits for landlords would come from benefit money.

It is true that rent control alone would not solve the housing crisis; nationalising the banks and mobilising finance to build quality council housing to meet social need should follow.

Fundamentally, capitalism is the problem. All of the major parties support it. The Socialist Party and campaigners in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition have a key role in establishing an alternative.

We campaign and fight for:

- Rent controls - a cap on rents in the private sector as an emergency measure
- Council run, not-for-profit letting agencies and full use of council powers to regulate the private rented sector
- House building and renovation - campaign for the government to divert its private developer subsidies to a mass programme of building quality council housing. For councils to use reserves and borrowing powers to build and renovate public housing now
- Bring all housing association stock and housing services back in-house - privatisation has driven up costs
- Axe the bedroom tax and reverse all housing benefit cuts
- Nationalise the banking system and mobilise the finance for a massive council house building programme.
- Nationalise the 'commanding heights' of the economy under democratic workers' control and management - the basis of a socialist plan to ensure resources are directed to meet people's needs.

Labour has little to crow about over housing. Between 1998 and 2010, when in government, Labour built only 6,330 council homes. Even the Tory Thatcher government managed to build 17,710 council homes in 1990.

Ed Miliband says he would emulate the 1945 government and build 200,000 homes a year. However, he doesn't say how this modest programme will be funded and whether these will be council or privately owned homes.

- 1.7 million households remain on ever lengthening social housing queues
- 2 million households are in rent and mortgage difficulties
- 38,000 families live in temporary accommodation
- 62,000 are officially homeless
- Rough sleeping is up by more than a third since 2010 according to official figures

The average value of a house owned by a cabinet minister has soared by over £200,000 (19%) since the 2010 election.

The Camerons' four-bedroomed house in Notting Hill, bought for £1 million in 2006, is now worth an estimated £2 million.

David Cameron rents it out for a cool £72,000 a year while he and his family continue to live rent free in Downing Street. He also owns a property in his Oxfordshire constituency valued at £1.1 million.

Welfare minister Iain Duncan Smith, who introduced the hated 'bedroom tax' last year, lives rent free in a £2 million Buckinghamshire mansion with four spare bedrooms.

An undercover investigation by the Daily Record into privately rented slum housing in Glasgow discovered "tiny rooms with barred windows that look on to a rat-infested courtyard, and we found blitzed men left unconscious in filthy

corridors".

Bellgrove Hotel owners, fat cats Ron Barr and Kenneth Gray, are creaming more than £1.5 million a year in housing benefit for such squalid accommodation.

The enormous gulf between the social classes in London widened further as recently published figures showed that average home prices surged by more than £8,000 last month to hit a new record high of £409,881.

The average London home went up in value by more than £40,000 in the year to January - around a third more than the average London salary - fuelled by overseas billionaires buying up property portfolios thanks to the Con-Dems' liberal tax regime.

NHS in crisis: Stop Hunt's hospital closure plans

Andy Bentley

Tory Health Minister Jeremy Hunt's decision to dissolve Mid Staffs Health Trust has taken a long time - but it comes as no shock.

The announcement has probably been timed to aid the government's plan to speed up the provision of rich pickings for the private vultures circling the NHS.

After campaigners' court victory against the closure of Lewisham Hospital's A&E, the government is using the announcement about Mid Staffs to rake up all the old discredited media attacks on health workers.

This is designed as a smokescreen to help rush an amendment to the Care Bill through Parliament. Dubbed the 'Hospital Closure Clause', if passed, it will allow the fast-track closure or privatisation of hospitals in as little as 40 days.

But, despite NHS workers at Stafford being pilloried relentlessly by the mass media and political leaders of all three parties for their 'failures' at Stafford hospital, the responsibility for any failures is to be found elsewhere.

To become a Foundation Trust in 2005, Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust needed to comply with financial targets set by the then Labour government.

It had to 'overcome' a debt of £10 million while forking out more money on a private finance initiative (PFI) deal to build a new entrance.

This was paid for with 160 job losses in 2006 on top of the 100 that had already been cut. But this 'successful' outcome for the Labour government and financial rulers proved to be a disaster for some patients.

It's clear that the government learned a valuable lesson from the 50,000 who marched in Stafford against the attacks on Stafford Hospital last April.

Through their rapidly moving amendment to the Care Bill they want to prevent this type of opposition on the streets again.

Lessons

Health trade unions and health campaigners also need to draw the necessary lessons from the Stafford march.

Firstly, it confirmed that a massive accumulated anger exists at the attacks on the NHS by this and the previous Labour

government.

Secondly, it also clearly demonstrated that a plan of action, drawn up by the health trade unions and local communities to carry out an organised campaign against the dismantling and privatisation of the NHS, including strike action if necessary, would receive the support of millions across Britain.

It would have the potential to stop the privatisation juggernaut in its tracks and herald the end of this government even before the next general election.

It would also be a warning to any incoming government to keep their hands off the NHS.

Fight the government's vicious sanctions regime

Ian Pattison, Youth Fight for Jobs

Experiencing the daily grind of poverty and fruitless job searches when you're out of work is very demoralising.

But the Con-Dem government goes the extra mile. They're hell-bent on making life as difficult and miserable as possible for unemployed people.

Recently, the news media has been awash with stories about the severity of benefit sanctions. The link between benefit sanctions and extreme poverty featured heavily in BBC's Panorama documentary, 'Hungry Britain?', on the spread of food banks across the country.

According to Panorama, a record high number of people, 875,000, had their benefits withdrawn through sanctions over the last year.

Demonstrating the depths of cold cruelty that Con-Dem policy can sink to, 130,000 of these were overturned on appeal. This outrageous figure would be even higher if more people appealed.

Many people have their benefits withdrawn for devastatingly long periods of time for what even the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) deems 'minor offences'. One family had their benefits cut entirely following a 'clerical mix-up', ie a mistake by DWP!

The DWP pleads innocence and claims there are no targets for sanctioning people on benefits. But PCS members working in jobcentres know that sanctions targets do exist.

Jobcentre workers are pressured into meeting 'management estimates' on benefit sanctions. Panorama featured one jobcentre in Grantham adorned with a wall chart showing the savings made from imposing severe benefit sanctions.

Jobseeker's Allowance recipients are by no means the only people to suffer from sanctions. Victims of the hated 'bedroom tax' have been told to find a lodger or more paid work to cover the penalties imposed on their 'spare room', without knowing this can affect their eligibility for housing benefit.

Benefit sanctions, even those provoked by mistakes by DWP, leave unemployed people with, at best, an emergency payment, but in some circumstances, nothing.

Out of touch former Thatcherite Tory minister, Edwina Currie, says there is no need for food banks and no such thing as food poverty.

Scandalously, Iain Duncan Smith has even claimed food banks contribute to 'entitlement culture', putting the blame for the disgustingly rapid expansion of food banks anywhere but at the doorstep of his government.

They're even more out of touch than we previously thought when they claim 'there is no link between their welfare cuts and the rise of food banks'.

The Con-Dem government should no longer be confident it can rely on public antipathy when attacking people on benefits. There is only so far they can push us, before we snap back!

Them & Us

Cuts kill

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has accused Tory London Mayor Boris Johnson of 'having blood on his hands' following the death of a pensioner in Woolwich.

The FBU says the closure of the local fire station - part of the Mayor's cuts programme - meant that crews took longer to attend the emergency.

FBU regional secretary, Paul Embery, said the pensioner "while suffering from smoke inhalation, was still alive and semi-conscious when crews discovered him, so his chances of being saved would have increased dramatically had he been pulled from the fire two or three minutes earlier."

Fat Dons

While university teaching and support staff have seen their pay steadily eroded in recent years, prompting strike action over a measly 1% pay offer, university vice-chancellors have seen their bank accounts swell with massive pay hikes, making them the new fat cats in education.

VCs' salaries in the Russell Group of elite universities have risen on average by over £20,000 last year, to nearly £300,000.

After pension contributions, that figure rises to £318,500. The outgoing head of UCL, Malcolm Grant, could have filled a wheelbarrow with his £41,077 rise, bringing his pay and pensions pot up to £365,432.

Perhaps these rises are 'performance related'? Not if Southampton Uni VC Don Nutbeam's award is anything to go by.

According to the Guardian, Don "celebrated a 13% plunge in undergraduate recruitment with a £19,016 rise".

Health and wealth

The government's £20-30 billion of NHS 'efficiency savings', ie cuts, has led to chronic staff shortages.

The lack of permanent staff in hospitals has led Trust managers to use private agencies to supply the necessary workers to keep services running.

But these agencies are charging up to £1,000 for a doctor, nurse, etc, for a single shift. Needless to say it's not the health workers who are pocketing this money but the health arms of large private equity firms such as Capita and Blackstone.

Cash strapped hospital trusts, already crippled through PFI privatisation contracts, are therefore facing a double whammy by having to fork out even more cash to provide full services.

No defence

The Con-Dem funding cuts in flood defences has resulted in at least £1 billion of damage to homes, shops and infrastructure after the wettest winter in England for over 250 years.

Even the government's own advisers have warned that a £500 million underspend will mean £3 billion of avoidable damage.

Now, new research published in Nature Climate Change says the increasing frequency of extreme weather events due to global warming - and also socio-economic factors such as developers building on flood plains, etc, - will see the annual economic cost rise from around €4.3 billion a year across the European Union today to a staggering €23 billion a year by 2050 without better flood protection.

Ukraine crisis: Ruling elites foster division and risk conflict

CWI Reporters

At least 6,000 Russian troops have taken up positions throughout the Crimean peninsula, formally an autonomous republic of Ukraine.

The Russian regime claims it took this action following a request from the Crimean government to intervene in defence of the rights of Russian citizens.

The Kremlin made clear that it may send troops into other parts of the Ukraine, if the rights of ethnic Russians are "harmed", although Putin said this will be "a last resort".

The Putin regime was handed an excuse for its actions by the new Kiev government's highly provocative and immediate decision to reduce the language rights of the Russian population and other minorities.

The far-right, anti-Semitic, Svoboda party has four ministerial positions in Kiev, including deputy premier.

A co-founder of Svoboda also heads the National Security Council and one of his deputies is head of the fascistic paramilitary Right Sector.

The interior ministry has said it will integrate the militia set up by the Right Sector into the police force.

The Russian Duma rushed through a new law to allow Russian passports to be issued to any ethnic Russian living in Ukraine.

It also passed a law allowing any region of another country to be annexed to Russia if the government of that country is deemed "unstable".

The Putin regime's military moves follow the ousting of President Yanukovich and the formation of a pro-western regime in Kiev.

The western powers' reckless meddling in Ukraine and the response of Russia has created the most serious military crisis in Europe since the Russia-Georgia war.

Features of a revolution

The last weeks initially saw a mass movement against the corrupt and authoritarian Yanukovych regime and the oligarchs.

This movement had features of a revolution, displaying the power of the masses, which led to the disintegration of the Yanukovych regime and the state apparatus.

But in the absence of powerful workers' organisations, reactionary opposition politicians, hard-line Ukrainian nationalists and the far-right Svoboda party and Right Sector were able to dominate the opposition, arousing deep suspicions and fears among the ethnic Russian population.

With barely disguised hypocrisy, US Secretary of State John Kerry condemned Russia's "violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Yet the US, when its key imperialist interests are at stake, carries out military interventions into other "sovereign" territories.

The military superpower invaded and occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, at a huge human cost.

Despite the western powers' howls of rage over Russian forces seizing control of Crimea, Nato forces occupied Kosovo after arming and militarily supporting the Kosova Liberation Army's conflict with the Serbian regime in 1999.

Faced with Russian troop movements in Crimea, western imperialism finds itself militarily paralysed and divided over what action to take.

European governments are resisting serious sanctions. Many European countries rely heavily on trade with Russia (from where Germany gets 40% of its gas and oil) and are reluctant to take action that worsens the EU's economy.

A photograph of a secret document detailing British cabinet discussions embarrassingly revealed a proposal to "not support, for now, trade sanctions... or close London's financial centre to Russians".

The new Kiev government already has severe problems on its hands that will affect the rights, not just of Russian speakers, but all workers in the Ukraine.

The economy is on the brink of bankruptcy and the government has announced big cuts in state expenditure.

Any financial package it receives from the west is already accompanied by demands for harsh austerity measures.

Cynical motives

To mobilise support for Russian military intervention, demonstrations were organised in several Russian cities, including 20,000-30,000 in Moscow.

The Putin regime is exploiting the real concerns of Russians, as well as promoting crude "patriotism" fuelled by anti-western feelings, to support its intervention.

Many Russians are, of course, genuinely concerned about the plight of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, given the thoroughly reactionary character of the new Kiev regime.

The Russian regime's military intervention is no more motivated by concern for the well-being of ethnic Russian workers than the western powers' cynical manoeuvres are intended to aid the Ukrainian-speaking working class.

The Kremlin is taking military action out of grave concerns that a pro-western, pro-Nato regime is now in place in Kiev, on Russia's western borders, threatening Russian imperialism's vital geo-strategic and economic interests.

Putin's intervention into Crimea aims to shore up Russia's vital 'near abroad' and is in keeping with his ambition to try to restore the power and influence of the Russian elite who, after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, transformed themselves into capitalists.

In response, the EU and US threatens economic sanctions and Nato sabre rattles. The Western-backed Ukrainian regime has ordered full mobilisation to counter the intervention. The working people of Ukraine will pay dearly for any escalation of the conflict.

End imperialist interference

Socialists call for an end to all imperialist interference and military interventions throughout Ukraine.

These reactionary forces threaten to escalate the crisis into a war. This raises the terrible prospect of ethnic and national conflicts in the region, similar to the bloody wars that dismembered Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The CWI in the region calls for the creation of anti-war committees in both Russia and Ukraine, including Crimea.

Democratically-organised committees can carry out cross-ethnic defence of any groups under attack by the far-right or Russian chauvinists.

Just a week ago, an opinion poll said that 73% of the population were then against Russia intervening.

On Sunday 3 March, hundreds were detained by police, including CWI members, for taking part in anti-war protests in different cities.

However Putin's chauvinist policies, "protecting ethnic Russians" in Ukraine, will most likely enjoy a temporary boost of support at home.

With the fall of President Yanukovich, the Russian elite were dealt a severe blow. Russia lost significant economic interests and what influence it had over the Kiev government.

As it did in South Ossetia before the war with Georgia, the Russian regime stepped up its campaign in "defence" of ethnic Russians in the Ukraine.

Pro-Russian protests

Last weekend saw tens of thousands on pro-Russian protests in the port city of Sevastopol, the base of Russia's Black Sea fleet and elsewhere in Crimea and east Ukraine, including Donetsk. "Self-defence" groups, supported apparently by Moscow, were set up, and seized government buildings.

Local and regional leaders were swiftly replaced with pro-Russian figures and dates set for referendums on secession.

Without an independent workers' movement, there is a danger that protests will increasingly take on divisive, ethnic features.

The mobilisation of up to 130,000 Russian troops on the Russia/Ukraine border quickly followed.

Although working people in the east are fearful of the new Kiev regime's policies and far right involvement, many are also worried that Russian intervention in the Crimea could develop into a war across Ukraine and even the region.

Many Eastern cities saw small but still significant demonstrations against wider conflict. Russian authorities say that ethnic Russians are fleeing the region into Russia and over 140,000 have applied for asylum in Russia.

The Crimea should have the right of self-determination, if it so desires. The region has long been the pawn of ruling

elites and big powers' intrigue.

In 1944, Stalin forcibly removed the peninsula's Tartar population. In 1954, Soviet leader Khrushchev handed over Crimea and its people to Ukraine, without any consultation.

Neither were the peoples of the former Soviet Union consulted when its regional leaders decided to break it up in the early 1990s and seize power in their own republics.

Right to self-determination

The CWI supports the right of the people of Crimea to freely and without any hint of coercion decide their future, be it enhanced autonomy or independence.

A democratically-convened constituent assembly, representing all sections of the working class, would ensure a referendum on Crimea's future is overseen by elected committees of working people.

The rights of the region's 300,000 Tartars and all other minorities need to be fully guaranteed, including their language and religious rights.

This will not be possible under capitalism, with its poverty, joblessness and exploitation and due to the competing elites playing the 'divide and rule' card.

Only a workers' government, replacing rotten capitalism with a society run in the interests of the working masses, can ensure the rights of all nationalities and minorities are protected, as part of a federation of socialist states in the region.

But what is happening now will not lead to genuine self-determination; it will only mean that Crimea becomes a Russian protectorate, like South Ossetia, or, even worse, an occupied region with a dictatorial ruler, like Chechnya's Kadyrov.

The experience of Kosovo and South Ossetia demonstrate that neither Russian nor Western imperialism can provide either economic security or the unity between different ethnic groups.

There undoubtedly exists a powerful mood of opposition to the new Kiev regime among Crimea's ethnic Russians.

But the referendum proposed by the pro-Russian Crimean government, backed by the force of Russian arms, will not take place in an atmosphere of genuinely free debate.

It will be forced through against the wishes of other ethnic groups in Crimea, like the 300,000 Tartars.

Workers' unity

Working people across Ukraine and Russia have more in common than divides them. Poverty, unemployment, exploitation and currency devaluation affect all workers.

The ruling elites of both countries are prepared to use ethnic differences to turn workers away from a united struggle. Now it seems they are prepared to go to war to defend their interests.

It is necessary working people across Ukraine organise to oppose the economic and social attacks that are to come from the new government.

Such a struggle will only succeed if the working class is united against the oligarchs and their far-right friends now in the Kiev government.

A unified working class struggle also needs a mass party of working people, with a socialist and internationalist programme.

By taking into public hands the key sectors of the economy and the wealth of the oligarchs and top bureaucrats, working people across Ukraine can be guaranteed decent living standards, pensions, health care, education and housing, as part of a socialist, democratically planned economy.

The pro-western Rada's "democratic revolution" amounts to restoring the 2004 constitution so as to transfer some powers from the President to Parliament.

Socialists call for a constituent assembly to be convened, in which all sections of the working class are represented.

A workers' government can replace the rotten capitalist state with a society run in the interests of the working masses, gaining a powerful echo from workers across the region.

- See www.socialistworld.net for updates

Northern Ireland executive rocked by 'on the runs' crisis

Michael Cleary, Socialist Party Belfast

The past continues to haunt the present in Northern Ireland. In the last week of February a major crisis rocked the Northern Ireland Executive and almost brought it crashing down.

The crisis erupted when charges against John Downey, a republican suspected of carrying out the Hyde Park bombing in London in 1982 which killed four soldiers, were dropped.

It had emerged that Downey had received a letter assuring him that he was not wanted by the authorities and it quickly became clear that 200 or so other individuals had received similar letters.

Men and women such as Downey were said to be 'on the run' during the Troubles when they left their homes in fear of arrest and moved between 'safe houses'.

Many operated in this way for decades, often ending up outside the North, residing in the South of Ireland or the United States.

The freedom for the 'on the runs' (OTRs) to return home and live free from the fear of arrest was a key issue for Sinn Féin during negotiations with the Blair government a decade ago.

Attempts to pass legislation at Westminster to solve the issue collapsed in 2006 and a side-deal was then done between Sinn Féin and the government. The letters were issued as a result of this deal.

The 'solution' to Northern Ireland's problems was touted by Blair and world leaders as a blueprint for addressing the national question.

But the OTRs crisis shows once again that it represented a cover-up among party leaders desperate for power.

As soon as Downey walked free a storm of protest erupted and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) First Minister Peter Robinson threatened to resign, claiming that he knew nothing about what he termed the "get out of jail free" letters.

If he had resigned the Executive would have collapsed (the Executive is in effect a mandatory coalition government of the DUP, Sinn Féin, the nationalist SDLP, the second largest unionist party the UUP, and the right-wing Alliance Party which draws support from both Catholics and Protestants). An Assembly election would have followed.

Instead, within 36 hours Robinson dropped his threat to resign, claiming that a promised British government inquiry meant that the letters were now "useless pieces of paper".

The immediate crisis has been defused but further shocks are inevitable, on the issue of the OTRs or on other issues, many relating to controversial events from the past 40 years.

The DUP are clearly open to attack from Jim Allister of the Traditional Unionist Voice (a hard line split from the DUP which is opposed to unionists sharing power with Sinn Féin), and his like.

While the actual letters were issued in secret it was evident that the OTRs have been allowed to return quietly home and are often living openly.

All the evidence is that the DUP knew this and that Robinson's bluster was an attempt to hide this reality.

The DUP is very concerned to be seen as on the side of the victims of the Troubles and fears losing votes if there is any hint that they are not.

There is real anger in the Protestant community on the issue of the OTRs. Many are incensed by what appears to be double-standards on the part of the British government - in their eyes suspected republican paramilitaries are granted an amnesty while loyalists continue to be pursued and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is examining whether charges can be brought against the soldiers who opened fire on Bloody Sunday.

Fractious atmosphere

The OTR crisis has to be seen against the background of a fractious atmosphere around the Executive table over the last year.

The main parties were never comfortable coalition partners but the almost continuous protests and violence on the streets since the flag protests (over the regularity of the flying of the Union Flag at Belfast City Hall) erupted in early December 2012 soured the atmosphere even further.

Last summer the DUP unilaterally withdrew from a plan for a peace centre at the site of the Maze Prison/Long Kesh which had previously been agreed with Sinn Féin.

Tension was high at the time, in part because of a Sinn Féin backed march to commemorate dead IRA members which went through the centre of Castlederg, a town which suffered many deaths during the course of the Troubles.

In an attempt to reach cross-party agreement, the DUP and Sinn Féin convened talks between all the main parties, chaired by US diplomat Richard Haas, on issues around flags, emblems, parades and the past.

The talks concluded in the last days of 2013, and ended in spectacular failure. The OTRs crisis has only served to accentuate existing divisions.

Day-to-day politics in Northern Ireland is often dominated by issues concerning 'the past' and the rights of the 'victims and survivors' of the Troubles.

The victims of the Troubles are those who suffered directly, that is, the thousands who died, the tens of thousands who were injured, and their families.

In a real sense all those who lived through the nightmare are victims, especially working class people who endured the worst of the violence.

There are heartfelt calls from all quarters for 'justice' for 'the victims' and these should be listened to.

The obvious problem however, is that there is a bitter argument over even simple questions such as just what justice amounts to and exactly who deserves to be termed a victim.

The plain truth is that many people will never have their pleas answered to their full satisfaction.

However, pursuing and jailing those who were involved in violence decades ago is not in any way an answer to the problems facing working class people today.

The only way to achieve justice is to ensure that we do not return to our grim past. The forces responsible for the Troubles should have no hiding place, they should be exposed.

Working class people suffered most during the Troubles and the workers' movement has a duty to expose the crimes of the political forces which whipped up sectarianism in the past, and often continue do so, even while they call for justice for the victims.

The workers' movement must also expose the crimes of the state - the establishment must not be allowed to avoid responsibility for the violence of state forces.

Learning the necessary lessons of the past would be a fitting memorial for those who died.

A real examination of the events of the last 40 years would lay bare, for the lie that it is, the poisonous idea that we are all somehow to blame for the Troubles.

Working class activists, primarily organised through the unions, stood against sectarianism and sectarian killings.

These activists were not responsible for the Troubles and to suggest otherwise is a travesty.

Alternative

Sectarian political parties, state forces, the paramilitaries, and the ultimately the ruling class, on the other hand, are responsible and have much to answer for.

They dragged us into violence in the past and will do so again in the future unless challenged.

There is an urgent need to create an alternative, for young people in particular, other than the often heard cry that there is no alternative except to leave Northern Ireland.

Well-organised trade unions with combative left and anti-sectarian leaderships, and a mass anti-sectarian party with a socialist programme which unites Catholic and Protestant workers and young people, is the alternative we strive to create.

International Women's Day

The miners' strike changed women's lives

This year is the 30th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike. An important feature of the strike was the involvement of tens of thousands of women in a huge support network, fundraising and picketing.

To mark International Women's Day 2014 Sarah Wrack spoke to Mary Jackson, who was involved in the strike in Yorkshire.

Why was the miners' strike such an important event for the working class?

It was a very clearly drawn class division. There was a glorious fightback by the working class. But the fact that it failed meant a massive difference to our lives, to our communities, and even to this day to our quality of life.

What's your impression of what interest there is in the miners' strike today?

I'm involved in a Facebook page which started nine weeks ago now I think. It's got over 18,500 supporters.

It gets hundreds on quiet days, thousands on other days, of comments and photos. It feels like the working class have been waiting to have their say on the miners' strike.

It's a significant anniversary but also the anniversary where the government papers are being released.

We've had a few - proving Maggie was a liar, MacGregor was a liar, NCB were liars, showing the miners could have won.

But we haven't had anywhere near what it's possible will come out in the middle of the year because there's the decision on Orgreave where the army and the police from all over Britain came to batter miners into submission.

We started the page to make sure that the anniversary got the respect it needed and was as widespread as possible.

We decided initially it would be non-political, until the supporters of the page made it so. It might have got to four weeks in before people were trying to organise the next revolution, or the next fightback! The anger's still there. I can't tell you how exciting it is.

Why did women get involved in the strike?

Because it was our livelihoods, it was our lives. It wasn't just our livelihoods, it was our kids' future, it was our future.

Personally I got involved when they sent the horses and the troops onto my street, in my town, terrified my mam to death so she daren't go out the house.

Initially the men were on the picket line. The amount of money people were expected to live on was about £11.50 if you were a couple with one child.

Money's moved on quite a lot since then but it wasn't enough to live on. There was absolutely no option but to get together to feed the kids and support the miners - women in their traditional role of feeding people.

And raising money - writing to everyone we could think of, trade unions, buckets on the street outside supermarkets collecting food and money.

But then as more and more miners got arrested, the bail conditions were that they didn't go on picket lines or demos.

So they swapped places and the men moved into the kitchen, or a lot of them, and the women moved onto the picket lines.

What effect do you think the strike had on the women who got involved?

It totally changed women's lives. They moved out of the house, out of the kitchen. It wasn't that none of them worked, but when women worked in those days it was very much 'nip out to work quick while the kids are in school, get back in time to get tea ready for everybody'. Whether women worked or not the traditional role was still there.

But women who had never spoken to anybody but their own neighbours were actually invited to trade union meetings -

I was going to say all around Britain, but it was much, much further than that - to Europe, the Soviet Union, South Africa and the US.

And then there were organised holidays for families with kids to the Soviet Union and elsewhere. And working class people, miners, did not go abroad for holiday. It totally changed our lives.

Men changed tremendously towards women. Initially I think there was a bit of 'what are they doing here?'

But at least two of the Yorkshire Doncaster pits have commissioned new banners for the anniversary - both to celebrate the role of women in the strike.

I was pleased at the first pit meeting I went to and then overwhelmed by the second. I just thought, I don't have to argue for women's role here, men were doing it for me.

It was a horrendous time and a defeat but it politicised a whole swathe of people, particularly women. And they've never lost it. We've bred it into our kids.

The BBC did a film ten years ago. They paid local people £50 a day - not bad for standing around in a crowd.

And there were kids of 14 years old saying "I want to play my dad". But they could not get people to play policemen.

They had to bus in professional agency workers from other areas. In the battle scene they had to keep stopping filming and saying "these aren't police, these are actors, stop battering them."

The Times called the involvement of the miners' wives "a turning point in the strike" at the time - why do you think that was?

It gave the men heart. They were worried about feeding their kids. Initially people did deals with the mortgage companies, agreed to a payment holiday - first one I'd ever heard of - until the men were back at work.

They cashed in their life insurances. Everything was sort of carrying on economically.

But then all that was running out, it was getting near Christmas, and men were worried. We were very much traditionalists.

Men's role was to go out and earn it, women's role was to stretch it as far as it needed to go. So the men felt they weren't fulfilling their role.

The support networks and the women getting involved made it impossible for the media and the government to organise an anti-strike, back-to-work movement.

And if the women hadn't stepped in, managed the finances from practically nothing, and then stepped onto the political and industrial plane, I think the strike would have ended much earlier than it did.

And it would still have ended in a defeat, but it wouldn't have ended in the proud defeat that it was. I can't explain to somebody who wasn't there the pride of the marches back to work.

What are the main lessons for today?

Unity among the working class. There was trade union support - all the men round this area certainly put money in the bucket on their way out of work, agreed to give 50p or £1 a week out of their wages. They were proud of the support they were doing.

But if the trade union leaders had brought the other unions out in support, if the TUC had got off its knees and organised a one-day strike, then the battle would have been different - Thatcher would have been on her bike long

before she was, and the working class wouldn't have had suffered the defeat and the consequences.

No going back

Glynis and Christine were members of the miners' wives support group who ran a kitchen near Barnsley. In an interview with the Militant (forerunner of the Socialist) in 1984, they said:

"Apart from collecting money we have held a pie and tea supper where two music groups gave their services for free.

"We've written to unions, raffled a lamp at the Liverpool conference, travelled to Birmingham and taken a collection at British Rail and Rover.

"A miner's mother aged 93 has sent a donation of £20 and we've also received two donations of \$50 each from a man and his wife who had kept a pub in the village then moved to Australia 60 years ago - he's now 83.

"A local journalist has also just brought in £100 that he raised on a sponsored walk to provide food for the kitchen.

"We've also been involved in picketing, we enjoy it - it's done like a military strategy. We've no fear of the police in spite of their treatment.

"A man who had been paid a day's work for the NUM took us all for a drink and a bag of chips after the picket.

"The miners told us we had made a difference to their picket line. For the first time some of the miners crossing the picket line had actually stopped to talk to them because of the surprise at seeing women there.

"We were involved in the women's rally in Barnsley. We've never done anything like this before. You don't have time to study how you feel about it, you just have to do it.

"We never used to take any notice of politics and government, but we have to now. We've stopped buying newspapers.

"The Star won't be delivered after they said something like 'Britain doesn't owe the miners a living'. They're so bad we don't even believe the ordinary every day stories any more.

"We can't go back to the old routine after the strike."

Proud to have been part of it

Written for the Socialist in 2004 for the 20th anniversary of the strike, Sue Alberry from Clowne, a North Derbyshire village which had half a dozen local pits, explains how the local Women's Action Group supported the strike.

Our group of miners' wives and other local women gave out 300-400 food parcels every week until the end of the strike.

The Parish Council let us use an empty shop and we visited local picket lines early in the morning with a soup run.

When we needed to feed pickets, there was no electricity or hot water in our strike centre, but we were given camping stoves, gas lamps, tables and we were soon cooking 200-500 breakfasts a day. We started a two shift-system - one week picketing, one week in the centre.

A local shopkeeper gave us buckets of hot water from his shop, another gave us bread rolls. The butcher wouldn't give us anything and his shop was boycotted for years afterwards.

The centre helped keep up morale. A young miner who'd come back from Orgreave, wearing just one trainer and shaking with fear, said: "They'll bloody kill us.

"It's insane. Why are they doing it?" I told him: "You've got to understand you're at war now."

We were followed by police and had our phones tapped. Once, two plainclothes police came into the centre eating fish and chips, pretending to be pickets.

But no pickets could afford fish and they were wearing brand new Hunter Wellington boots! I politely confronted them, got £3 for their cups of tea then told them to get out.

In the school summer holiday we supplied hot meals for the kids. We found clothes, prams and cots for babies born during the strike.

At Christmas we organised a party at a local pub with a striking miner as Santa - all the kids got a small present.

The hardest part was when they went back to work. We marched back with them, heads held high because we did what was right. I felt proud to have been part of this strike.

Women getting involved in the miners' strike were also spurred on by other attacks the Tories were making and the response to them:

- Between 1980 and 1982 female employment fell by 800,000
- Cuts to health, school meals, home help, etc, means that women workers in the public sector had their hours cut and wages lowered
- Of the 8 million women at work in 1984, 5 million were low paid
- Over half of Britain's working women were denied the right to maternity benefits, paid maternity leave and shorter working hours
- Under Thatcher publicly funded childcare fell to the lowest level in western Europe
- In 1981 there had been a successful seven month occupation by mainly women workers at the Lee Jeans textile factory in Greenock, Scotland to save jobs
- There was an ongoing women's peace camp occupying Greenham Common in protest at nuclear weapons

Unemployment among women is now at its highest rate in 25 years. Almost three times as many women as men have become long-term unemployed since the Con-Dems came to power in 2010.

Women are being forced to give up work because of cuts to working tax credits and the rocketing price of childcare. There has been a 31% cut to funding for sexual and domestic violence services.

Read more about the miners' strike as well as women and the fightback today with these titles from Socialist Books

www.leftbooks.co.uk, 020 8988 8789:

- A Civil War Without Guns: the lessons of the 1984-85 miners' strike by Ken Smith, £8 (postage included)
 - It Doesn't Have To Be Like This: women and the struggle for socialism by Christine Thomas, £7 (postage included)
 - Women: Fighting Austerity, Fighting For Equality a collection of articles from the Socialist, £2 (postage included)
-

Doncaster Care UK Unison start 7-day strike

"Cowardly company of carpet-baggers" is how Unison full-time officer Jim Bell described Care UK, the private company that is tearing up the terms and conditions of around 200 care staff in Doncaster. "They're not used to dealing with trade unions."

Well, they're meeting their match now! Well over 100 Unison members, having twice voted by over 90% for industrial action, held a protest picket outside Care UK's Doncaster office on the first day of seven days of continuous strike action. With flags flying, placards raised and whistles blowing, strikers demonstrated that they are not prepared to let Care UK walk all over them.

Within 90 days of winning the tender for Doncaster's learning disability supported-living service, Care UK has torn up the TUPE agreement and is axing enhanced payments for unsociable hours worked. Due to the nature of the job this means staff losing as much as 50% of their pay, as much as £7,000 a year and on average £440 a month. Workers are being threatened with dismissal and re-engagement on these worse terms if they don't accept by 21 March.

No one ever wants to take strike action but even more so for care workers whose service users are not only vulnerable people but "part of the family". But staff are already leaving because they can't afford to live with such drastic pay cuts. So this strike is to defend the service as well.

But Care UK doesn't care. They've brought in staff from as far as Grimsby and Stoke, put them up in a hotel and paid for taxis, to try to break this strike and say a normal service is operating. Well it's not. Not when these "staff" don't know the service users, haven't been trained, CRB checked or had their jobs. There has already been an incident where an epileptic man had a seizure because there weren't any trained staff to administer his medication and the paramedics had to be called.

Make no mistake, these care workers, mainly women, are very determined and will be back protesting outside Care UK offices again tomorrow morning.

Alistair Tice

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 27 February 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Carmarthenshire county Unison branch challenges Labour with a no-cuts budget

What's the point of New Labour? That's the question being asked by many working class people in Wales particularly after all eleven Labour-led councils have voted for or are in the process of voting through vicious cuts to local authority jobs and services.

Labour councillors claim 'there's nothing we can do'? But these cuts, if implemented will transform local authorities from providers to purchasers of privatised and reduced services in a few years.

The lie that there is nothing Labour councillors can do was put to rest when the Carmarthenshire county Unison branch produced and submitted a no-cuts budget. Our branch called on Labour councillors to implement it and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Unison members, council workers, trade unions, anti-cuts groups and the wider community and to build resistance to the cuts (Unison policy).

We called on councillors to build a mass campaign of resistance linking up with the other ten Labour councils in Wales to fight the cuts.

We received no formal, or even informal, response from the Labour leadership of the council to our budget but then we had been used to the sound of silence from them when it came to even criticising Con-Dem cuts - so no change there!

Labour decay

The full council meeting on 19 February exposed the degeneracy of the Labour Party and how far it has come from being a party that in the past, at times, fought in the interests of working class people. Labour councillors were conspicuous by their absence from the debate. The reality is, in voting through Con-Dem cuts, they put their own self-interest and their political careers before council services they were elected to provide.

Councillors prefer to hide behind council officers. But in the case of Carmarthenshire the audit office in Wales have already ruled that their advice was unlawful on two occasions recently!

Attack on unions

Carmarthenshire Labour-led council in coalition with Independents (Tories in all but name) also voted to end trade union secondments. It was claimed by council officers that this would save money but this is clearly a political decision as Labour and Independent councillors attempt to stifle our branch fighting their cuts and representing our members' interests. They have made this decision as our branch has been resolute in opposing all cuts, something unfortunately we cannot say for many Unison and other local government unions in Wales to date.

In the recent past some Labour councillors proudly told us they were ex-NUM members. It seems that it was right then to fight to keep the pits open but it's not okay to fight to keep local government services now!

It seems that in terms of its political evolution the Labour Party has taken an evolutionary dead end. It no longer represents working class people. While we cannot 100% rule out that it can be changed it would need a massive influx of working class people, trade unionists, and youth, etc. That is as likely as a jelly fish developing a backbone. Watching the budget debate in Carmarthenshire county council - the passivity of the Labour councillors and the lack of fight when they all voted for cuts along with the Tory, sorry independent, coalition partners - you could only draw one conclusion. We need a new mass workers' party.

A Unison member, Carmarthenshire, Wales

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 26 February 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Justice under the knife: Legal aid cuts interview

Ahead of the 7 March strike by lawyers Russell Fraser, a young criminal barrister and joint secretary of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers spoke to Sarah Sachs-Eldridge about the implications of the cuts to justice and the plans to fight them.

Who will be affected by legal aid cuts?

In order to qualify for civil legal aid, you must both be lawfully resident in the country and have lived in the country for at least 12 months. This means, for example, that if the Yarlwood detainees who've been allegedly sexually abused by

some of the privately employed prison wardens there wanted to sue either Yarlswood or the secretary of state, they wouldn't be able to.

There's also going to be a threshold introduced for criminal legal aid. Anyone with a disposable household income which is greater than £37,500 would not qualify for legal aid at all. If two people are earning it's quite a low bar. Under that you have to make contributions to your defence and if acquitted you don't get it back.

It's not all career criminals or people who are constantly in the courts - family proceedings and criminal proceedings will be affected.

What will the impact be?

The effect of the cuts is two-fold. One is that people will have to represent themselves and when they do hearings take longer and the supposed saving is wiped out by adding costs to running the courts.

We have already seen the effects of the last round of cuts in 2010. In the family courts, new evidence requirements for accessing legal aid are difficult to satisfy. So some women who have alleged that they have suffered domestic violence have to represent themselves or perhaps don't take the cases to court at all.

We certainly expect miscarriages of justice to increase. Innocent people will go to prison and guilty people won't be convicted - it works both ways.

The second effect is with changes to things like civil legal aid and Judicial Review (JR). With civil legal aid there is a merit test. If there's a new type of case or if it's a test case then by its very nature it's uncertain what its prospects of success actually are. Now, if there's a borderline chance of success then you won't get legal aid for it. Very important cases may not be brought to court.

What's behind the attack on Judicial Reviews?

JR is a mechanism by which people and groups and organisations can hold the state to account, where the state may have made a wrong or unlawful decision. The government is saying now that lawyers will not be paid for the initial stages of their work. Lawyers may think: I can't run the risk of taking this case and it being refused permission even if I think it's probably quite a good case.

If these important cases aren't being taken then the law won't develop and won't progress. The Poundland case against forced workfare is another example.

We're seeing an attempt by this government to insulate itself against challenge and criticism and scrutiny. Any restriction on JR starts to look like a way of avoiding accountability.

There was a separate consultation last year on shortening the time period by which a JR could be brought to challenge a planning decision. The reason given was not that there were abuses of it or that there were inefficiencies or there were spurious claims. Justice minister Chris Grayling claimed the government legislative programme was being interrupted by JRs being brought and 'much-needed reforms' were being slowed down.

That's not a principled basis on which to approach a problem. That's a purely ideological way of thinking. In an article last year Grayling said that left-wing campaign groups were using JR as a publicity tool. He also talked about restricting the eligibility requirements further for being able to bring JR.

But, as usual, the government falls back on the claim there isn't enough money.

From the outset the government has inflated the real size of the budget for legal aid. You routinely hear that it's £2 billion a year. This may sound like I'm splitting hairs but it's less than a billion on criminal legal aid and about a billion for the rest. The criminal legal aid spend has been falling without any intervention from government year-on-year. The

real argument is that it's a false economy which will end up costing more.

Those of us working in the criminal legal aid side think there's simply no room to take any more money out of the system. The Crown Prosecution Service is chronically under-resourced. The government is proposing to cut fees by 17.5% across the board and to limit a magistrates court case to £258. The hourly rate will probably come out as less than the minimum wage given the work that has to go into preparing a case.

Inefficiencies are caused by delay - often arising from problems with G4S and Serco getting people to court or having insufficient staff in court to bring people where they need to go. The outsourcing of translation services seems to be an unmitigated disaster.

But isn't the legal profession as middle class and wealthy as you get?

People have been surprised to learn, as a result of the action, what we earn. A friend of mine, after working for a year or so self-employed, filled in a tax return and had earned about £13,000 for the year. So we're not actually rolling in money. People have to rely on overdrafts or parents.

Things will be pushed back - it'll be people who've made a lot of money in a previous career or have wealthy parents who can come into law. Barristers don't have pensions, maternity or paternity leave, we don't have sickness pay. It'll be increasingly difficult for women. People from ethnic minority groups will be less likely to do the job. The likely disappearance of BME lawyers firms will have an impact on Black and Asian communities, making the justice system more alien, dominated as it is by rich, white men.

It's interesting how it got to this point. A lot of my senior colleagues say we should have done this a long time ago. Successive governments have taken money out of the system. I take the view that maybe at the top end some QCs are getting paid too much. But it shouldn't be used as a way of attacking and undermining the system.

There have been sections of the profession from the outset saying we should argue back, we should take a principled stand but it gets to the point where there's a certain naivety in that approach. There are different reasons why the government is doing this - it's not simply to save money. A QC who was a Tory MP has said we should give the MoJ a list of dates in which we are going to withdraw our labour! That's hardly the sort of language you hear from arch-Tories.

So what does all this mean for 'justice'?

I wouldn't necessarily agree with those who say we have the best justice system in the world - it wouldn't be the justice system that I or any socialist would envisage. But compared to the US criminal justice system it's far better. There you can only access the justice system if you've got money. Lawyers are under pressure to get as many clients as possible because they need the money. They can't adequately devote time to each case.

When legal aid was introduced in 1949 the then attorney general said the point of legal aid was to open the doors of the courts freely to anyone regardless of their wealth or ability to pay. We're getting so far away from that principle now. In the 70s the majority of the population would have qualified for legal aid but now it's nothing like that.

This has been a defence campaign from the outset. The HS would always argue for legal aid to be extended, to be more available. Why anyone who's accused of a crime should have to pay anything towards the defence of that until they've been found guilty is completely bonkers to me. I think it should be free at the point of delivery, especially for criminal legal aid because what's at stake is ultimately often the liberty of the individual.

Grayling is also attacking prisoners. He thinks prisoners don't deserve legal aid - that they should go through the very institution that is treating you unfairly or unlawfully to have their complaint decided - it's absolutely outrageous.

We always talk about legal aid as the fourth pillar of the welfare state and it's being eroded. But where the government wants a lawyer there's an open chequebook. Two QCs were paid £2 million between them last year.

What action is proposed?

We had the half day in January - in essence a strike. It caused a lot of disruption. The government, of course, said that something like 75% of all courts were open - they weren't operating to anything like full capacity.

The next date is 7 March. Again it's combined with barristers and solicitors. It's an entire day which Haldane has been campaigning for. I appreciate that a lot of people were nervous about it. We've got professional obligations which can make it very difficult.

There will be a demonstration outside parliament with people like Paddy Hill (Birmingham Six) and Shami Chakrabarti speaking. We're then going to have a march from parliament to the Ministry of Justice. That march will pass the Supreme Court and the Liberal Democrat headquarters. At their conference last year the Lib Dem delegates passed a motion saying these cuts should be stayed until they've properly reviewed. The Justice Alliance tries to remind Nick Clegg of this but he's said nothing in response.

Ian Lawrence, Napo general secretary, has supported us from day one and he's also speaking on 7 March. The unions, PCS, Unite, etc, understand what's going on better than most. In my view it's unfortunate that we've not been able to coordinate a date with them but in many ways it's extraordinary to see lawyers protesting in this way so I shouldn't be too negative.

Sign the Justice Alliance petition here: <http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/david-cameron-uk-government-save-legal-aid-to-protect-access-to-justice-for-all>

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 27 February 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Leeds council workers discuss cuts fightback

A Leeds council steward

On 4 February Leeds Unison branch had an all-stewards meeting in response to our employers' cuts proposals.

We had also teamed up with the GMB and Unite for an activists' rally to mount a serious campaign to back our national pay offer of £1 an hour extra on all grades with a view to involve our members in industrial action to win.

We were told that over 1,500 jobs have been lost over the last three years due to the Early Leavers' Initiative and natural wastage, leaving fewer staff expected to do the same amount of work.

Many services, particularly in adult social care, have been either closed or transferred to the private and voluntary sector.

Approximately £150 million has been cut in the last three years and the council want to cut a further £82 million over the next three years with as much as £50 million being cut in the next financial year. £24 million is to be cut from Children's Services alone. From 2010-11 to 2016-17 as much as 40% will be cut from the council's budget.

Our service conditions are being attacked by cutting jobs, car allowances, pay and overtime, as well our previously agreed redundancy arrangements.

What was significant in both the stewards' meeting and the national pay rally was that activists saw the need for action on both fronts. They are essentially the same battle.

Our employers' shopping list of proposals cut too deep for us to accept, and the union leaders, who up to now, have worked with the Labour-led council, have at last said 'enough is enough'!

To achieve a yes vote in any consultative ballot for industrial action we need a lively campaign against the cuts to inspire our members and prepare for strike action.

We must also build public support with lobbies and marches, calling on the council to set a budget to meet people's needs.

Train drivers vote for action at Northern Rail

Craig Johnson, RMT Relief Regional Organiser North, spoke to the Socialist

Depot drivers who are in the RMT at Heaton Depot, Newcastle and Neville Hill Depot, Leeds, working for Northern Rail, have voted by a massive majority, for strike action.

This is because of the company's failure to recognise properly the tasks and skills that they have to perform with the various different types of trains they operate.

We're demanding a fair grading and pay structure for them. They do a crucial job when it comes to Northern Rail's operations, shown by the fact that the company have imported a scab army of managers to try and undermine this effective action.

Once again with railway management we see hurried training schemes and the undermining of the safety culture in an attempt to beat the action - it never works but it exposes their tactics.

I've heard reports that they are putting these scab managers up in top hotels with no expense spared. So they can find the money for some things.

Northern Rail, which is a shoddy joint venture between Serco (recently exposed in the security tag scandal) and Abellio, the Dutch national railway, makes millions out of the rail privatisation scandal, while not recognising the hard working skills of their staff.

It's disappointing that it seems the HR department stumbles from one industrial dispute to another and also has a reputation for sacking staff on trumped up charges.

Cleaners strike at London college

Outsourced cleaners working at SOAS college in London were on strike on 4 and 5 March in their battle for the same sick pay, holidays and pensions as staff employed directly by this part of London university. Through previous strikes the workers have won the London Living Wage and trade union recognition.

Book review

Nigeria's battle for a mass workers' party

Over the weekend of 1-2 March, 74 people were killed in a terror bombing by Boko Haram insurgents in Africa's most populous country, Nigeria.

Naomi Byron here reviews a new book that sheds light on Nigeria's history of struggle and on what is needed to bring an end to terror and poverty there.

The Socialist Party's sister organisation in Nigeria, the Democratic Socialist Movement, has published a brilliant book on the struggle for a mass workers' party.

It is an object lesson in how to fight for workers' representation and a socialist alternative.

The book 'DSM and the Struggle for a Working People's Political Alternative' republishes articles, manifestoes and leaflets written over 26 years.

Opening with an impassioned call for a party of labour in 1987, it shows how this demand was applied through all the twists and turns of dictatorship, through repeated fake "transitions to democracy", annulled elections, civilian rule, mass pauperisation, nine general strikes and trade union leaders who cannot be trusted.

It covers the many false starts toward a workers' party in Nigeria:

- The launch of a Labour Party in 1989 which was banned by the military dictatorship a few months later and the many false "transitions to democracy" organised by the military including the 12 June 1993 election, immediately annulled because the "wrong" party had won (both were set up by the military).
- The launch in 1994 of the National Conscience Party (NCP) under military rule and the long fight for registration; its extraordinary success in the 2003 general election and subsequent takeover of the party by careerist politicians.
- Ex-Nigeria Labour Congress (equivalent to the TUC in Britain) leader Adams Oshiomhole's successful campaign to become governor of Edo State.
- The takeover of the Labour Party (launched in 2004) by moneybags, pro-rich politicians.

Highlights include the Nigerian comrades' approach to the National Conscience Party (NCP) in the 2003 and 2007 elections.

The NCP was never a socialist party, but its pro-masses and pro-struggle credentials were established from the beginning by its founder, radical human rights lawyer Gani Fawehinmi.

The NCP, with the DSM's active participation, particularly in Lagos state, led the campaign to force the regime to allow registration of political parties.

The mass support won by its record of struggle and its slogan "abolition of poverty" was reflected in the 2003 general election.

Despite only winning registration in December 2002, four months before the election, the NCP came fifth nationally and third in Lagos state.

Lanre Arogundade, DSM member and NCP candidate won 77,000 votes (9.4%) in the senatorial election in Lagos West, coming third out of 20 parties.

These were the official results - the real vote before ballot rigging, intimidation and violence, would have been far more (for Lanre's manifesto, see pp149-153).

Yet in the 2007 elections the DSM called for a boycott. DSM member Lanre Arogundade, who was democratically selected as NCP candidate for governor in Lagos, was subsequently replaced by an unknown candidate from the USA who wasn't even a member of the NCP, by the national leadership who had been taken over by careerist pro-capitalist elements.

This imposed candidate was accepted by the Nigerian state, desperate to halt the success of working class and socialist forces in the NCP - hence the boycott, which was widely supported.

Another highlight is the section (pp375-404) taking up what Adams Oshiomhole should do as governor of Edo state.

For example, to deal with the House of Assembly blocking his education reforms the DSM proposed that Oshiomhole should 'set up a working people assembly which could through mass action compel the pro-capitalist, anti-poor assembly to approve pro-masses programme... [the assembly should] decide the next steps on how to implement the proposed reforms and recall any member of the State House of Assembly who goes against programmes aimed at improving the lives of poor working people in the state.'

Reading the book brings enormous respect for the capacity for struggle of the Nigerian masses who have fought time and time again to change Nigeria for the better.

Support for socialist ideas was so strong in the mid-1980s that a "Political Bureau" established by the Babangida dictatorship to consult the population on the way forward for the country, in its 1987 report actually recommended (among other things) that "Nigeria should adopt a socialist socio-economic system"!

For easy reference the text is divided into five chapters: the Labour Party; the National Conscience Party; Anti Military and Civil Rules Struggle; Adams Oshiomhole; and the Socialist Party of Nigeria.

For those not yet familiar with the twists and turns of the Nigerian struggle, the introduction and forward explain these well.

This book shows that only mass action and a socialist programme, led by Nigeria's powerful working class, can fundamentally abolish poverty and want.

It aims to help theoretically arm a new generation for the battle to build a new mass workers' party in Nigeria.

The Socialist Party Nigeria was launched in 2012 and faces a battle to be registered by June 2014, for the 2015 elections.

You can follow the progress of the Socialist Party Nigeria, and the Democratic Socialist Movement, online:

<http://socialistpartyofnigeria.blogspot.co.uk/>

<http://www.socialistnigeria.org/>

DSM and the Struggle for a Working Peoples' Political Alternative

Edited by Segun Sango

DSM and the struggle for a working people's political alternative. A Democratic Socialist Movement (Nigeria) book. Special offer for readers of the Socialist.: £10 per copy or 3 for £25.

Available from Socialist Books

PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD

020 8988 8789

www.socialistbooks.org.uk

bookshop@socialistparty.org.uk

Please make cheques payable to Socialist Books

Letter of protest to the BBC

On 25 February the BBC's 6pm news bulletin referred to Militant, the Socialist's predecessor, in its item on PIE. Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary and former editor of Militant, sent the following letter:

"In an item on the Paedophile Information Exchange's links with the National Council for Civil Liberties, you quoted Christian Wolmar, who said: 'PIE very deliberately targeted libertarian left groups who might be fighting for anything from abortion rights to Northern Ireland in order to give themselves legitimacy.

"This was the same tactic indeed as Militant or some other political groups like that, trying to get inside and presenting themselves as respectable.'

We object strongly to the inference in this quote; that supporting the ideas of the Militant newspaper are as repugnant as paedophilia.

Further, Christian argues that Militant supporters needed to 'get inside' other political campaigns in order 'to present themselves as respectable'.

We completely refute the suggestion that Militant supporters ever hid their ideas to gain 'respectability' - the fact that the newspaper was able to gain such prominence is a testament to that.

Militant supporting MPs and councillors very clearly set out their ideas in numerous speeches, as well as the leading role Militant supporters played in the Liverpool council of 1983-87, and in the battle against the poll tax to give just a few examples.

The ideas and actions of Militant supporters, of fighting against austerity, supporting strike action and protest movements, and offering a socialist alternative, are perfectly 'respectable' to millions of people today.

It is outrageous to compare Militant to the activities of paedophiles, towards whom the vast majority justifiably feel revulsion.

The inclusion of a reference to Militant is spurious and completely unnecessary to the story.

We were pleased to note that the second sentence of the above quote was edited out in the 10 o'clock bulletin, after complaints from Socialist Party members and others. This is a partial admission of error in airing the quote in the first instance.

However, this comparison was put forward unchallenged on the 6 o'clock bulletin, watched by several million people, and is also at the time of writing available on BBC iPlayer.

We request that you issue an apology and correction on a subsequent edition of the 6 o'clock News or another suitable platform. Should you refuse, we will take legal advice to see what further steps can be taken."

Union question time - Labour has no answers

James Evans

I went to a recent Communication Worker's Union Question Time in Manchester. The panel included Michael Kane,

newly elected Labour MP for Wythenshawe and Kevin Maguire from The Mirror who had written an article calling on the unions to break the link with Labour.

All the panel other than Maguire endorsed the individualised membership recommended in the Collins review and refused to defend unions' right to have a collective voice in the party. Most trade unionists present were angry at this.

When I spoke I said I'd had a period of unemployment, even though I was promised that university would open the door to success.

Under Labour, there was a push towards getting people into higher education. But there are not enough jobs, 40% of graduates are now unemployed six months after graduating, and an average of 80 people apply for every graduate job.

I asked what a Labour government would do about this. A Labour councillor said they would guarantee work after two years of unemployment, but I defy anyone to live on £55 a week for two years.

The audience were angry at Atos for making millions from taxpayers by judging people's capacity for work.

The panellists tried to join in on their ATOS-hating. But under the last Labour government Atos earned substantial sums of money, including a £300 million contract from NHS Scotland.

After the meeting I told Michael Kane that I had seen an ambulance with the logos for Arriva train operator and the NHS which made me feel sick as I hate seeing public services being sold off. Kane replied: "Well you can't blame the government for handing out that contract."

So a member of the party that set up the NHS does not oppose the private sector making money off patients' needs.

The evening was meant to showcase "union friendly" Labour candidates but it showed Labour is not a party for working people.

Action against vicious council cuts

Hull

It came as no surprise to campaigners and trade unionists in Hull that the Labour council passed a budget which will mean cuts of £48 million to services over the next two years, with a loss of up to 500 jobs.

Last year was a rollercoaster for the council workforce. Trade union members were balloted for strike action three times over changes to terms and conditions while the threat of job losses was ever-present.

In the end, the threat of strike action by the local authority unions forced the council to reduce its plans.

This process has worn at the nerves of many workers who understandably just want the whole horrible situation to go away.

Despite this, up to 200 trade unionists and community activists took part in the lobby on the day of the budget setting.

In 2013 three labour councillors in Hull were prepared to stand up and vote against cuts. This year only Gill Kennett voted against the cuts budget.

Huge cheers came from the public gallery when she did so. Unfortunately Gill stands alone as a true champion of the 99% in Hull.

Dean Kirk abstained and Gary Wareing voted for the cuts. Gary's actions, in particular, are both disappointing and inexplicable. Gary had been seen as the leader of the 'Hull three'.

If the strategies of trying to reclaim the Labour Party put forward by those on the left like Len McCluskey and Owen Jones were ever going to be successful it would have been in Hull.

With three Labour councillors acting as standard bearers for a fightback and a layer of left trade unionists active in the party, it could have been argued that a favourable situation existed for this strategy to succeed.

Yet as Gary Wareing despairingly claimed: "We haven't managed to budge a single sitting councillor or get anyone to join the party".

In fact, at many public and trade union meetings held in Hull in the last year when Gary called on the audience to join the Labour Party, he was met with a storm of indifference.

Increasingly in Hull, increasing numbers of activists are recognising that the way forward is through a new mass workers' party.

The media widely reported the fact that activists on the lobby felt let down by the Labour Party and needed something new that truly represents them.

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition will be standing in Hull this May for this reason.

Mike Whale

Powys

Powys, one of the most rural counties in Wales, with no large towns or cities, is not known for political protest.

Yet a very vocal and colourful lobby of the county council's budget meeting on 25 February resulted in two major climb-downs from the council, which is run by various so-called 'independents'.

A campaign by parents and teachers to save additional learning needs (ALN) units in the county's schools has developed into a broader 'Powys Uncut' campaign taking as its starting point opposition to all cuts.

One mother at the lobby movingly described how her autistic daughter, who is unable to speak, had flourished in the unit at brand new Golwg Y Cwm school in Ystradgynlais.

Protesters opposed cuts to the schools library service, respite care, day centres and home care for elderly and disabled people. The Socialist Party's bilingual leaflets and placards were well-received.

The council backtracked on two of its flagship cuts - the ALN units are to stay, and the six-fold increase in charges for using day centres has been dropped. The council failed to agree its budget and was adjourned for a week.

It's clear that the bulk of the £20 million cuts will go ahead - the struggle to save our services has only just begun.

Kate Jones

Nottinghamshire

Nottinghamshire Unison and campaign groups lobbied the Labour-controlled county council's budget setting. Over £80

million of cuts over three years were agreed.

Nottinghamshire Unison adopted a policy last September of requesting a full review of spending with a view to setting a one year no-cuts budget based on using reserves and borrowing powers.

This was seen as a 'stop gap' to build a campaign against the government's local government budget cuts. This review was never done.

In the end the council backed down on some proposals - the Aspergers team, welfare rights advisers and community café were saved, for example.

But more cuts are to follow. Nottinghamshire Unison spoke to council leaders, we wrote an open letter to councillors, we even texted every Labour councillor on budget day appealing for them not to vote for cuts. But not one voted against.

Isn't it about time that Unison backed candidates who stood by local union policy?

Pete Watson

West Sussex

On 14 February councillors gathered at West Sussex county council to vote on whether to approve more brutal cuts.

More than 100 disabled and elderly people and their carers gathered outside county hall waving banners calling on the Tory council to stop the cuts.

As the debate began the public gallery erupted and the chair of the Don't Cut Us Out anti-cuts group strode to the front of the gallery and addressed the chamber. She made an incredibly passionate speech about the impact the cuts had made.

This was followed by two brilliant speeches from people who had been directly affected by cuts.

Despite this brilliant fight the Tory majority held firm and the £100 million cuts to care services were voted through. The fight continues.

Sarah Welch

Leicester

200 noisy protesters gathered outside the town hall in Leicester on 26 February to oppose the cuts proposed by city mayor Pete Soulsby and being approved by the council.

Many of these were workers at the children's centres where 133 jobs are likely to go. They were joined by other council workers as well as many groups affected by the cuts.

The lobby was addressed by representatives of council workers and unions as well as Leicestershire Against the Cuts, including Socialist Party members.

The council unions will now be considering industrial action against the job losses - and the campaign against the cuts goes on!

Steve Score

- You can also see longer reports from [Hull](#), [Powys](#), [West Sussex](#) and [Leicester](#). Send your reports to editors@socialistparty.org.uk
-

Independent public inquiry demanded into police infiltration and conspiracies

Niall Mulholland

Well over 100 legal workers from the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, anti-racist campaigners, environmentalists, and trade unionists attended the Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance (COPS) public meeting on 27 February.

The chair, Liz Davies, described how the campaign came about following media revelations last year of police infiltration, by the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), of anti-racist and environmentalists' campaigns. Special Branch police and building industry firms also conspired to secretly blacklist building worker trade union activists.

Despite the evidence of former police spies, no official investigation has been ordered by the government. Instead former police agent Peter Francis, who went public last year on his role and who via his solicitor sent his support to the meeting, is being smeared by the police hierarchy.

Liz Davies told the packed meeting that COPS is calling for an independent, public inquiry, with powers to compel witnesses.

The solicitor Imran Khan read a statement to the meeting from Doreen Lawrence, the mother of Stephen, who was killed in a racist attack in 1993.

Dave Smith spoke on behalf of the Blacklist Support Group, representing building workers who, on an 'industrial scale', were stopped from working. A House of Lords Select Committee hearing on the matter found that Special Branch police met building industry representatives. A police agent confirmed that MI5 and Special Branch shared files on building worker activists. Anti-racist campaigners were also targeted, even if they had not worked in construction.

One of the two defendants in the famous 'McLibel' court case (in which McDonald's sued them for libel), Helen Steel, told the meeting about the psychological abuse she suffered at the hands of police spying.

Robbie Gillett, an environmental activist, explained how undercover police officer Mark Kennedy joined climate change campaigns, taking on important roles in order to act as an agent provocateur.

The last panel speaker was Lois Austin, former national chair of Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE), which police agent Peter Daley (real name Peter Francis) infiltrated, as well as Militant (forerunner of the Socialist Party), in the 1990s. Lois explained that arising from Daley's role, large police files are held on her and other anti-racists and socialists.

Lois called for COPS to be a broad umbrella campaign. A key demand is for an independent public inquiry - there can be no trust in the police investigating the police or another establishment-run 'inquiry' whitewash. Not just the police tops but also politicians should be investigated about their role, including former home secretaries, both under New Labour and the Tories.

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 3 March 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Fighting youth low pay (and security bullies)

Laurence Maples

On 1 March Socialist Party and Youth Fight for Jobs campaigners protested against zero-hour contracts, low pay and poor working conditions in Croydon.

Our chants, placards and leaflets encouraged young workers to join unions and fight for better employment conditions.

We targeted the Croydon Outlet Store - notorious for its low wages, bullying management and zealous anti-union attitude.

Although we were standing outside the shop on a public road, bullying security guards aggressively demanded we leave and tried to take our placards.

Naturally we continued to exercise our right to peacefully protest. These management stooges violently attacked us, tearing our material and manhandled one young protester across the road.

Numerous passers-by, including an off-duty security manager, intervened to berate the security guards' attack and phoned the police.

Undeterred, after speaking to the police and receiving a half-hearted, begrudging apology from the store manager, we continued the protest.

The capitalists are willing to invest in heavy handed repression to protect their profits but they won't fund decent jobs and pay.

We had an excellent response, showing how deeply working class people resent the bosses' drive to impoverish us through low pay and measures such as zero-hour contracts.

Later we discussed plans to take the movement forward, including regular youth meetings, stalls, and asking to speak at union branches about our experience of organising young workers.

NHS cuts: Anger explodes onto the streets of Halifax

Mike Forster

Last week, the Calderdale and Greater Huddersfield NHS Trust announced a public 'consultation' on the future of Accident and Emergency provision in the area. They have put forward five proposals, most of which will see either Huddersfield or Calderdale A&E closed, although one of the more 'radical' ideas is to shut them both!

The Trust favours the closure of Calderdale A&E but is now obliged to engage in a four month consultation. Experienced activists know from other campaigns that the Trust will use every trick and argument in the book to get its way and only mass, united and determined resistance will stop it. It is therefore crucial that such a campaign is built now.

The combined population of the Calderdale and Huddersfield area is 750,000 and there is absolutely no way one A&E department can service everyone without tragedies along the way. This will be a matter of life and death for many critically ill patients.

Campaign preparation

Anticipating the announcement, activists from 38 degrees, Unison, Keep Our NHS Public, Save Our Services and Socialist Party members have been mobilising to defeat these disgraceful proposals. Several meetings were held at the beginning of the year and an outline plan put in place in anticipation of last week's announcement.

At least we weren't taken by surprise, and were able to get straight out on the streets. In reality Socialist Party members have been out since the beginning of the year and we had already collected over 600 names in opposition even before it went public.

Last Saturday six of us hit the streets with two stalls, assisted by volunteers from 38 Degrees. Even then, we could not cope with the wave of public interest and anger. Despite having eight petition boards, we were still swamped and could not keep up with the punters coming to the stall, sometimes three deep. People took away petitions to get filled in; they took away bundles of leaflets to spread the word and our sign-up sheet of willing activists soon swelled. We sold out of copies of the Socialist and collected £50 in donations.

A public meeting has been called for Saturday 29 March to launch the campaign with speakers from the community and wider labour movement; already 500 flyers have gone out and email groups are buzzing - this will be a huge gathering which will shake the Trust's apparent complacency about their ideas.

Initiatives taken

While running the stalls, people were telling us of a demo taking place to save the A&E in two weeks' time which had been organised on Facebook. Twenty minutes later the organiser of the group, a student from the local college, came to join us in handing out leaflets.

Anger and activity is literally springing up from below everywhere. The main task facing the campaign will be to coordinate and organise this anger into one huge movement, but it will be without any doubt one of the biggest protest movements in Halifax since the days of the poll tax. Even the local Labour MP approached us to ask if we could work together on the campaign and agrees that only thousands on the streets can defeat the plan.

A parallel campaign is developing in Huddersfield and we will ensure that the two groups work together to stop any potential disunity. There is a feeling that things have now gone too far and people are saying in their hundreds that they want to get involved. To follow the campaign, log onto http://www.unisonyh-action.org.uk/calderdale_campaign

Public Meeting: Saturday 29th March, Halifax Leisure Centre 12.30pm

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 3 March 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Barton Moss protesters say no to fracking

Dylan and Jo Murphy, Huddersfield Socialist Party

During half term holiday we went over to Barton Moss, Manchester to join the protest against fracking. At the moment IGas is over halfway through exploratory drilling for gas.

We joined about forty protesters at the entrance to Barton Moss Road when the drilling trucks arrived. Protesters blocked the entrance to the road that leads to the drilling site. A large contingent of police (about 60) surrounded us and started to push us down the road.

For the first five minutes we moved very slowly down the road towards the drilling site. Then the police started pushing more aggressively and moving us quite quickly down the road towards the site. Numerous protesters were warned for leaning back into the police line when they were being pushed forcefully by the police along the road.

The whole time we were being photographed and filmed from umpteen different angles by a squad of police officers.

Police protect trucks

Arriving at the entrance to the drilling site a dozen officers were guarding the gates. The police then proceeded to kettle us while the convoy of drilling trucks entered the site, to calls of 'shame' by the protesters. Once the drilling trucks were safely inside their heavily fortified compound the police disappeared.

We spoke to several people who are part of the anti-fracking camp which is close to the drilling site. They told us about numerous arrests of protesters which have been dismissed by the crown prosecution service due to lack of evidence.

We also spoke to several local residents, like Paul, who said that he admired the people who had come from all over the country to protest against the poisoning of his children. He told me that local residents are divided about the fracking, many believing that nothing can be done to stop it. He expressed his fear that the drilling site, which is close to population centres in every direction, would leave a poisoned wasteland behind.

The owners of the drilling site (Peel Holdings) have taken legal action to evict the protest camp. On 6 March a court will rule if protesters have to dismantle it.

The labour movement must oppose this toxic time bomb that threatens to engulf parts of Britain over the next few years.

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 3 March 2014 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Oppose the EDL in Worcester

The far-right, racist English Defence League is planning a rally in Worcester on 22 March. There will be a counter-mobilisation.

Anti-racists are to meet at 12 noon, the Guildhall, Worcester. The job now is to get to trade union branches, anti-racist groups and community organisations to mobilise the majority who oppose racism.

We must clearly explain how the capitalist parties' support for cuts, job losses and lower living standards provides the soil for racism to grow.

<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/18248>