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NHS in crisis

This emergency is no accident!

An NHS Healthcare Assistant

The NHS is under increasing strain as the crisis in hospitals' Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments deepens.

Four weeks ago the figures for A&E waiting times were the worst since records began. Then three weeks ago they were even worse, until two weeks ago when they were worse still, and finally last week when they became the worst ever recorded... again!

Over that period the number of trolley waits (patients waiting over four hours for a bed after being admitted from A&E) more than trebled when compared to the same time last year.

Sixteen hospitals were forced to declare a "major incident", where a hospital admits to being unable to cope with the workload it faces and needs extra staff. The number of hospitals where overworked, underpaid workers are already at breaking point is much higher than that.

An overstretched A&E department also means other services, such as routine operations, being cancelled at short notice.

Pressures

How has this A&E crisis developed? Years of cuts to local government services, by councils led by all three major political parties, has resulted in a shortage of social care provisions for elderly and disabled people.

Consequently these vulnerable people are more likely to occupy hospital beds, thereby blocking the throughput of patients.

Likewise, the government's 'reorganisation' of the NHS and cuts has made it even harder for people to get a GP appointment when they need one. In the last year nearly one million people attended A&E after being unable to see a local GP (this represents just one-tenth of those unable to get a GP appointment).

There have also been staffing cuts, putting huge pressure on those who remain and are expected to deal with an increased workload with fewer resources.

The NHS will be a major battleground for the mainstream political parties in the build up to May's general election. But their unanimous support for private interference in public health and the piecemeal cutting of services, show that not one of them can be trusted with the future of our NHS.

A&E is one of the most unrelentingly stressful parts of the NHS to work in, and many staff face exhaustion. The last thing anyone should want is for these workers to feel demotivated. But that is exactly what the government is risking by refusing to give NHS workers even the paltry 1% pay rise recommended by the NHS pay review body.

In response the health unions will be taking a further two days' strike action; for 12 hours on 29 January, followed by 24 hours on 25 February, to fight for our overstretched NHS to be staffed by motivated and decently paid workers.

Billionaires five times richer than in 2004

Fight inequality with socialism

Simon Carter

Eye-wateringly massive inequality. An ever-widening wealth gap between the super-rich and the rest of us. Scandalous tax-avoiding arrangements propped up by successive Labour and Tory governments.

Familiar themes to readers of the Socialist, but a subject usually ignored on TV. It was therefore refreshing to watch BBC2's recent two-part documentary, *The Super-Rich and Us*.

Narrator Jacques Peretti points out that Britain has the highest number of billionaires per head of population. Their estimated wealth is over £301 billion, up from £65 billion in 2004 - nearly fivefold growth.

The reason for the aggregation of the super-rich here is obvious. Thanks to decades of tax-cutting policies, this elite can live virtually tax free as "non-doms" as far as their global wealth is concerned.

Only recently did they have to pay a token £30,000 annual tax bill. As one tax expert says: "They probably spend that amount on a kid's birthday party!"

Trickle-down

Former Tory prime minister Margaret Thatcher supposedly believed in the nonsense theory of "trickle-down" capitalism. The idea is a richer minority at the top will dispense more wealth to wider society, by fuelling economic growth.

But as economists point out in the programme, in reality trickle down has meant trickle up - the 1% vacuuming up huge amounts of money from the 99%. A typical worker's income, by contrast, has fallen by around 9% since 2008.

Peretti also reported on how the selling of properties and land by cash-strapped local authorities is making cities in Britain, particularly London, a magnet for global investors to expand their property portfolios.

Swathes of central London real estate are being gobbled up by profit-hungry Russian oligarchs, Middle Eastern oil sheikhs and Chinese and South Asian speculators. These billionaires spend, on average, £22 million on each mansion they buy. And home-grown property tycoons, intimately connected with the Tory party, are rapidly expanding buy-to-let investments.

Stratospheric rents

House prices and rents in central London are now at stratospheric heights. These properties have become private security boxes for the elite - a safer investment even than gold. But as one city planner remarked, if this trend continues, then a capital city emptied of workers will cease to function.

Best-selling author and economist Thomas Piketty is interviewed in the show. He calls for a very modest wealth tax of the assets of the super-rich. But the main parties would be unlikely to implement it, since they are all funded by the same super-rich.

Piketty, however, fails to grasp that them-and-us society is not simply due to a few wilful individuals. It is inherent in the profit system of capitalism, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed out in the Communist Manifesto way back in the 19th century.

But Marx and Engels also had a solution that retains its validity today - the abolition of class-based society and its replacement with socialism!

The Super-Rich and Us is available on BBC iPlayer.

Circle vulture flies out of Hinchingsbrooke

Jackie Grunsell

Just three years into a ten year contract the private company Circle has pulled out of its contract to run Hinchingsbrooke National Health Service (NHS) hospital in Cambridgeshire.

The contract was put out to tender by the previous Labour government after the hospital ran into trouble with 'debts' of £40 million - the result of underfunding and a costly PFI privatisation building deal. Circle was awarded the contract by the current government and took over its running in early 2012.

Hinchingsbrooke is the first acute hospital to be run entirely by a private company and Circle pulling out is a damning indictment of the process of NHS privatisation.

In its attempts to balance the books, the company's policies have led to the hospital receiving an "inadequate" rating from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in a report last week. The CQC particularly highlighted problems of understaffed A&E and medical departments putting patient safety at risk.

Circle said "it was difficult to see how any private operation looking for a commercial return could run an acute services hospital under the present model."

In other words they can't make sufficient profit out of running acute healthcare services. They argue that cuts of 10% plus to their funding, inadequate social care and increased demand in A&E make it impossible for them to continue.

Instability

Of course, these problems are putting all NHS services nationally under huge pressure to the point of breaking. However, publicly run health care services don't have the option of simply throwing in the towel.

The fact that a private company can just walk away when the going gets tough, shows how privatisation, expanded by Labour governments, has introduced huge instability into the NHS. Circle should be punished for their failure and made to repay all the public money they received.

The recent Health and Social Care Act (England) introduced by the Tory-Lib Dem government, and the privatisation process, has resulted in private companies gaining short term contracts to run health services. Even then they can pull out if they determine these to be unprofitable.

The system of payments for acute hospital services and the new commissioning bodies run by GPs, alongside the government's insistence on £20 billion 'efficiency savings' in the NHS, pits doctor against doctor in a battle for ever decreasing sources of funding.

Circle cites a dispute over funding with local GPs as one of the difficulties they faced. But this is what the marketisation of the NHS has produced!

Neither of the main parties has an answer to the problems either of Hinchingsbrooke or the crisis faced in the NHS.

Labour blaming the Tories for appointing the 'wrong private company' at Hinchingsbrooke ignores the underlying problem of any private company running healthcare to make money.

It's time for the NHS to be properly funded. The millions of pounds of debts owed to private companies for Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deals should be cancelled and services brought back into public ownership, where patient care can finally come before profits.

Healthcare needs to be planned in a democratic and accountable way with the genuine involvement of staff and patients in deciding what is needed and how services should be run.

Massive investment is needed to train and increase staffing levels across all areas of the NHS to meet needs.

This has to be fully integrated with social care and community based services which also need adequate funding not more of the cuts which are planned.

Stop the Tory strike ban plan

Last Sunday, in Paris, Prime Minister David Cameron was happy to rub shoulders with fellow right-wing political leaders at the head of the millions strong march to defend 'democracy'.

However, the Tory premier's lofty ideals don't appear to have made it to this side of the English Channel. Au contraire, the Tories have yet again announced more anti-trade union measures for their election manifesto to further restrict the ability of workers to defend jobs, pay, pensions and services.

Among the Tories' latest attacks is the imposition of an unfeasibly high yes vote in strike ballots for 'core public services', such as firefighters, health workers, transport workers and teachers. All groups who have recently conducted high-profile industrial action.

Currently, a simple majority in a workforce ballot is sufficient to allow workers' action. However, Tory transport minister Patrick McLoughlin - who dismissed the recent London bus workers' pay strike (see page 4) as "ridiculous" - wants a new law to impose a strike ballot threshold of 40% of the total membership, not simply a majority of those who actually vote.

For example, if 700 out of a union membership of 1,000 vote in a ballot (a 70% turnout) and the result is 395 yes, 295 no and ten spoilt papers, even though 56% voted yes, under the Tories' rules it is only 39.5% of the overall membership thereby invalidating the yes vote.

The Tories also want to lift a ban on the use of agency workers during industrial action, so that schools can draft in tens of thousands of supply teachers instead of having to close. They also want to impose a three-month time limit after a ballot for strike action to take place and further restrict picketing.

Of course Cameron conveniently omits to mention that his party secured only 23.5% support of the total electorate in the 2010 general election. On that basis, if his proposed rules were applied, the Tories would not have been able to form a government.

Even with Lib Dem support the total coalition vote was 37%, still short of 40%. Indeed, only 15 MPs achieved a 40% yes threshold in 2010.

In fact, no political party in Britain since 1951 has secured the support of 40% of the electorate.

This strike ban proposal, along with the current attack on PCS (see the Socialist 834), has to be fought collectively by the trade unions, both industrially and politically. Thatcher's anti-union laws stayed on the statute book through the Blair and Brown years so it would be a mistake to be just left to a possible Labour victory in May.

This again shows the importance of building a political alternative that can stand against austerity and for union rights.

Them & Us

Fat Cat Tuesday

The FTSE 100 top bosses' average £500,000 pay rise last year means Britain's fat cats are now so wealthy (an average annual salary of £4.72 million) that according to the High Pay Centre by the late afternoon of the second working day after the festive break their earnings had passed the average worker's annual salary of £27,200.

Last year these bosses had to wait another 24 hours until 'Fat Cat Wednesday'!

- £177 billion profit made by landlords from capital growth over the last five years

(This profit figure actually excludes income from tenants' rents!)

Economic blockage

House prices in London have shot up so much in the last five years (average price £429,000) that, according to the Financial Times, they are blocking labour mobility, threatening economic growth.

More than Denmark

The capital's housing is now worth the total of all housing in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In two boroughs - Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea - the combined price of houses and flats is £231 billion; the GDP of Denmark the world's 35th largest economy is £222 billion!

Affordable housing

Someone unfazed by costly housing is scandal-prone prince Andrew. Last week we reported the royal was living in a £22,000 a week Swiss ski chalet. In fact he liked the seven bedroom pad so much he bought it for £13 million just before Christmas!

- Private sector rents consume an average 40% of tenants' gross income

A good read

David Cameron's festive holiday reading included a medical memoir book by neurosurgeon Henry Marsh. Marsh has recently announced he is retiring after being a hospital consultant 28 years at St George's Hospital, in south London, because of an increasing bureaucratic NHS "privatised by the dumb f***s who run the government."

Help build an anti-cuts electoral alternative

Come to the TUSC conference, 24 January

Dave Nellist, TUSC national chair

The 7 May general election will be seen by many as an opportunity to ditch the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition that has imposed the widest and deepest austerity for generations.

The first few days of January saw the 'formal' opening of the 2015 general election campaign. Many newspapers marked it by predicting the closest election for many years.

They were mainly referring to the outcome. Currently neither Labour nor the Tories seem likely to gain a working majority without support from another smaller party. But the description could even more accurately apply to the narrow political terrain on which the action is to be fought.

All four national parties of the establishment - Tory, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Ukip - are united in the central message of 'eliminating the deficit'. Despite, in some areas, plans already being in place for mass closures of libraries, community centres, children and family centres and most adult education - cuts sufficient to 'balance the budget' in the next parliament would need to be at least 50% greater in the next four years than the last. A horrifying prospect.

Even the Greens agree the necessity for cuts. Shortly before Christmas, on the BBC Daily Politics programme, Green leader Natalie Bennett said that, as part of a 'confidence and supply agreement', Green MPs would support a Labour cuts budget as a better alternative to a Tory cuts budget.

So what do you do if you're fundamentally opposed to continued wage freezes, the sacking of hundreds of thousands of public sector workers and the axing of essential public services?

You need something new.

Serious opposition

The only prospect for trade unionists wishing to see serious political opposition to the continued diet of austerity from the main parties is the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC). We need to push forward the development of TUSC into a viable electoral alternative.

That underlies the importance of the conference organised by TUSC on 24 January to discuss the May 2015 general election and local authority elections campaigns.

TUSC has set an ambitious target for next year's elections: 1,000 anti-cuts candidates in local council wards and 100 anti-austerity candidates in parliamentary constituencies. This would be the largest left of Labour, working class and socialist alternative, seen since the Second World War.

If these numbers can be achieved it should entitle TUSC to 'balanced media coverage' in the election period - including TV election broadcasts in England, Scotland and Wales.

The conference will be an opportunity for TUSC activists, candidates and organisers to meet others who are building an alternative to the austerity parties in their areas. Sessions at the conference will discuss the core policies, for both a general election and the local elections, on which TUSC candidates will stand in May.

Debates between the main four national parties will exaggerate synthetic differences of policy and artificially exaggerate secondary issues. Only the widespread standing of serious anti-austerity alternative candidates, rooted in the organisations and communities of the working class, can offer a genuine alternative in May.

TUSC 2015 elections conference

Student Central (formerly ULU), Malet Street, London, WC1E 7HY

Saturday 24 January, 11am to 4.30pm

Registration fee: £10 waged and £2 unwaged/low-waged

Capped pooled fare of £10

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) is an electoral alliance that stands candidates against all cuts and privatisation. It involves the RMT transport workers' union, leading members of other trade unions including the PCS, NUT and POA, as well as the Socialist Party and other left and anti-cuts groups and individuals.

- www.tusc.org.uk

Socialist Party Election Appeal 2015

The Socialist Party is appealing for £50,000 to help fund our candidates for the 2015 elections, as part of TUSC. Below members explain why they are donating.

"Derby Socialist Party had two of four candidates in last May's TUSC election campaign. We made history being part of the biggest left challenge to Labour in 60 years. This year TUSC is

looking to make an even bigger stand with 100 parliamentary and 1,000 council candidates. To ensure we take full advantage of this opportunity finance is of utmost importance.

I pledge £300 towards the Socialist Party's appeal of which the first £100 has been paid.

In Derby, TUSC has organised a public meeting against the closure of a local pool and leisure centre. The day after the council announced the closure, TUSC supporters held a stall opposing the closure and received an excellent response to our petition. An online petition has been signed by over 6,000 people in a short period of time showing the anger against the proposed closure.

At our meeting we will aim to encourage people opposed to the closure to stand in the election. This will give the campaign a big platform that will add to the pressure the council is already facing on this issue."

Charlie Taylor, Derby

"Although it always feels like 'there's too much month at the end of the money,' I'm proud to contribute £100 to the Socialist Party's election appeal.

Times are tough when you have children, work in the public-sector and had years of real-terms pay cuts under New Labour and the Tories.

Many public servants face job cuts, a threat that exists for firefighters in Lincolnshire among many others.

TUSC supporters in Lincoln and District TUC have played a part in launching a new 'Defend Our Fire Services' campaign in conjunction with the Lincolnshire FBU to stop the cuts, with prospective Lincoln TUSC candidate Elaine Smith elected as spokesperson."

Nick Parker, Lincoln

Thanks also to Mick Hudgell, Sheffield North, who has donated £100; Paul Gerrard, Salford (£100) and Iain Dalton, Leeds (£100).

You can donate to the Socialist Party's appeal online at www.socialistparty.org.uk/donate, by phone on 020 8988 8777, or send a cheque (made out to "Socialist Party") to PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD. Please mark your donation "Election Appeal 2015".

Editorial of the Socialist issue 838: this is a shortened and updated version of the statement posted online on 10 January. See the original at: www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/19894

France: counter the terrorist threat with workers-led mass unity

The shocking terrorist attacks in Paris, mainly at the journal Charlie Hebdo and in a Jewish supermarket - with 17 victims - was met with mass revulsion and outrage. The Socialist too condemns these attacks, as with previous terrorist attacks, including 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in London.

These atrocities have been directed at ordinary working people and do nothing to counter oppression. On the contrary, they serve to promote division and polarisation and aid the interests of the capitalist class, whose biggest enemy is working class unity and strength.

Across France 3.7 million people turned out on the streets on Sunday 11 January to express horror and anger, including up to 2 million marching in Paris.

Imperialism

But sickeningly, government ministers in France, across Europe and beyond - whose policies in power have laid the basis for terrorist atrocities to occur - hypocritically rushed to be seen on the Paris demonstration. David Cameron and Ed Miliband, whose parties were as one in the UK parliament on participating in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan in which hundreds of thousands were killed, joined the Paris march.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu attended also, fresh from last summer's terrible slaughter of over 2,100 Palestinians in Gaza. Successive French governments have sent troops into west and north Africa many times, in the economic and strategic interests of French imperialism.

All these interventions, and many others by the world powers, as well as killing, maiming and displacing millions of people, have increased the threat of acts of terrorism in the West. Much of the basis for the present bloody conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya was laid by imperialist interventions which have been regarded with outrage by much of the world's population, not least in Muslim communities.

These conflicts have become military training schools for aspiring jihadists from around the world and created the ground for the rise of particularly brutal, reactionary and authoritarian Islamist formations like al-Qa'ida and Islamic State (IS).

The present US-led air attacks on IS - involving French and British forces among others - are helping IS and al-Qa'ida to recruit new followers, as well as worsening the carnage on the ground.

Austerity and discrimination

In addition, Western capitalist governments are imposing another kind of destruction at home: of jobs, services and workers' living standards, while the rich become richer.

In France, poverty-stricken immigrant populations are particularly concentrated in the 'banlieues' - large, rundown estates in the city suburbs. These communities face high levels of unemployment, police harassment, racism and discrimination. Far from being aided by the terrorists' actions, they now face worse state repression. Also racist physical attacks by far-right groups and individuals have increased, such as attacks on mosques.

In Britain, right-wing populist Nigel Farage added to the racism after the Paris attacks by saying: "We in Britain, and I've seen some evidence of this in other countries too, have a really rather gross policy of multiculturalism... we do have a fifth column within our countries".

In France the far-right Front National will try to make gains out of the situation - further whipping up anti-immigrant, racist sentiment. However, last weekend, capitalist politicians across the board were trying to take advantage of the mass mood of revulsion in order to boost their own popularity; French president Francois Hollande saw a 10% increase in his very low approval rating.

Now it is urgent in France, as the demonstrations subside, to develop the building of workers' unity - across all religions and none - to quickly organise against attacks on democratic rights in the name of fighting terror, and against scapegoating of minorities.

In Britain, the head of MI5 has used the Paris killings to call for new powers for the security services. However, the police already have powers to investigate, arrest and charge terrorist suspects without new laws being introduced that can in the future be used against trade union activists and anti-austerity campaigners. Cameron wants to increase powers to intercept and listen in to communications, which also will be used against more than just terrorist suspects.

Head of UK counter-terrorism policing Mark Rowley, declared: "At this stage, there is no UK connection" but ominously added "the threat levels remain unchanged, at severe for the UK". The MI5 intelligence service assesses that around 600 people have gone from Britain to the Middle East to fight with Isis or the al-Qa'ida linked Nusra Front. Around half have returned, many disillusioned with Jihad, but not all.

Nevertheless, past attacks like 7/7 in 2005, Woolwich in 2013 (both in London), and now the Paris attacks, show that the terrorism danger exists in any case from alienated individuals who have never fought abroad. All three of the Paris attackers were France-born and had not fought abroad.

Freedom of expression

Charlie Hebdo, regarded as a left-leaning journal, has based itself on ferocious irreverence to religious leaders, prominent politicians and authority in general, desiring to shock and outrage. Its blunt satire has been deliberately provocative, including by publishing cartoons of Mohammed.

The Socialist supports the right of individuals to be part of any religion, or none, free from discrimination and oppression. At the same time we defend freedom of speech, including through satire. This isn't just for cultural reasons but also because censorship can and will be used against trade union activists and socialists by state institutions, hampering our ability to expose exploitation and class interests.

This doesn't mean there should be no boundaries. Few people would support turning a blind eye to material that deliberately and consciously promotes rabid racism or sexism, for example.

However, who decides what is not acceptable? We can't trust censorship bodies appointed by governments that are at present almost entirely composed of pro-capitalist, pro-austerity politicians. The boundaries of what is acceptable should be democratically decided, which in a socialist society would be by regularly elected representatives of ordinary people, subject to recall at any time.

Working class

Countering terrorism is not largely the task of 'moderate' Muslims as some commentators argue. The very small minority in society who consider turning to it can come from any background, for instance Norway in 2011 saw far-right terrorist Anders Breivik kill 77 people in a shooting spree.

Instead, unity and leadership by working class people is essential. Mass movements of workers, the unemployed, pensioners etc, acting together in an organised way for improvements in living standards and challenging the whole agenda of capitalist governments, can and will turn the tide against the growing threat of terrorism.

Terrorism will not be eliminated by the capitalist ruling classes and governments; they have created the conditions for it in the first place and are now incapable of removing them. No amount of increased state repression by them will end the threat.

The ongoing crisis of the world economy leads governments to be even more hell-bent on launching attacks on the majority, and is serving to increase imperialist division and armed conflict. In France, Britain and across the globe, new mass workers' parties need to be built, putting forward socialist ideas that can show the only way out of this nightmare scenario.

Public ownership of the key industries, socialist economic planning and democratic decision making at all levels of society would lay the basis for ending war, oppression, exploitation, poverty, and terrorism on a permanent basis.

Charlie Hebdo: no to terrorism

Don't let us be divided! Fight against racism!

This statement was written (on 8 January) by Gauche Revolutionnaire (the sister organisation of the Socialist Party in France) in response to the attack on Charlie Hebdo, but before subsequent events.

The 7 January attack on the offices of satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo by heavily armed men and the murder of 12 people was a shocking event which we condemn as a cowardly and barbaric act.

The attack on Charlie Hebdo and individuals such as cartoonists Wolinski and Cabu is no random act. In many different ways they fought intolerance, racism and censorship. By attacking ordinary workers, those committing this atrocious murder demonstrate that they have nothing to do with the fight against racism, that they are not acting in defence of Muslims, and that they have no desire to live in a society which is tolerant and shows respect for all.

French Muslims will feel no sense of relief from this act, quite the contrary. Moreover they will be the ones who suffer the consequences on the streets, since this is what happens every time one of these blind acts is committed. Those terrorists who claim to defend a 'religion' are no better than the reactionary Islamophobes who will now be rubbing their hands and planning violent acts against Muslims. Both groups work hand in hand to breed intolerance. This hateful and cowardly act of terrorism reinforces all those trends which seek to divide workers and young people on the basis of religion or ethnicity.

What is Charlie?

Charlie Hebdo is the product of a long struggle against censorship, racism and the far right, although it doesn't spare the Left either. It uses provocation and extreme sarcasm as a way of undercutting media and political manipulation.

We defend Charlie because we believe in freedom of expression. We know that the ruling classes are very quick to attack this right. When Charlie Hebdo published the cartoons of Mohammed it was in response to the death threats against the Danish journalists, to say, in effect, that we do have the right not to believe in God, and to criticise religions.

The problem is that to approach the issue in such a provocative and sometimes insulting way, in the context of an escalation of anti-Muslim racism, especially after 9/11, is no answer, and may even play into the hands of the racists. While defending the right to the fullest freedom of expression, it is for this reason that we would wish to distance ourselves from some of the observations and drawings published in Charlie.

Wolinski and Cabu's cartoons may have sometimes seemed 'stupid' or 'nasty', but their aim was to attack stupidity and oppression. From early on in their careers they confronted the forces which pressed down on society - the Church, the army, supporters of colonialism, the far right. What the terrorists targeted in their cowardly attack was not the real Islamophobes of the far right but the defenders of freedom of expression, and those struggling against oppression and totalitarianism. Often in their work it was not faith itself which was the target but the use made of it by the powers-that-be and by racists.

Hypocrisy

Seeing all those politicians who were criticised and caricatured by Charlie defending the magazine defies belief. The cartoonists would have laughed out loud if they had been told that the bells of Notre Dame Cathedral would toll for 15 minutes in tribute to them - quite an achievement for these dyed-in-the-wool anti-clericalists!

There is something laughable in the limitless hypocrisy of the ruling classes and their servants in the media. We will take no lessons in 'freedom of expression' from them - we know that 90% of the press is in the hands of the major capitalist media groups, who do not hesitate to apply censorship in their pursuit of profit. In November, a new 'anti-terrorist' law was passed in France - using the pretext of combatting jihadi networks as an excuse to spy on people. But now the politicians are suddenly worried about our freedom.

Even the far-right National Front (FN) wants to join in 'national unity' and claims to defend a magazine which was opposed to what is the FN stock-in-trade - racism and Islamophobia in particular. FN leader Marine Le Pen is even using this opportunity to call for the reintroduction of the death penalty, something which the cartoonists at Charlie always opposed. There can be no room for the FN in the commemorations of the deaths at Charlie Hebdo.

Some right-wing MPs such as the UMP's Mariani claim to defend freedom of expression yet attempted to ban certain public events and even rap songs. There can be no unity with these politicians who attempt to use the current mood to promote their racist ideas.

And certainly there must be no unity with those heads of state who took part in the big demonstration on 11 January at the invite of Prime Minister Valls. For example, Rajoy, the Spanish prime minister and heir to Franco, and Cameron, the British prime minister who in his younger years led Conservative Youth and their 'hang Mandela' campaign.

New force needed

We will demonstrate and pay tribute to the victims, in defence of freedom of expression and thought, and against socially regressive policies which provide fertile soil for fanatics and reactionaries of all stripes. We need the maximum turnout to the protests to stop them from using these deaths to make themselves look squeaky clean. Yes, we need unity, but not a spurious unity which is no guarantee of our freedoms.

We desperately need (and have done for years) a political force which will defend the victims of capitalism. This force should be open to all, and have as its goal the unity of workers, young people, the unemployed and pensioners, whatever their origin or ethnicity.

We need a political force which is just as serious about fighting the attacks by the government and the employers as it is about fighting racism and intolerance. The government, led by the so-called Socialist Party (PS) talks about the 'jihadist danger' in France while it supports Turkey which is assisting IS in Syria, and while it is in alliance with Qatar and Saudi Arabia whose ultra-reactionary regimes also support terrorist groups.

The present government also bears some responsibility for the poisonous atmosphere in recent months. Without batting an eyelid they are following their predecessor Sarkozy down the road of undermining the welfare state and democratic rights.

We shouldn't lose sight of the thousands of redundancies, the ultra-liberal policies in favour of the rich and the rising unemployment - which affect us all, wherever we come from. While mobilising to pay tribute to the dead we must not leave aside the vital task of a generalised struggle against the policies of this government which serves the rich and the bankers.

On 8 January the newspaper le Monde carried the headline: 'France's 9/11'. The fact that they dare to make this comparison gives an ominous indication of the atmosphere which we will encounter in the weeks to come. We can expect that a larger space will open up for the forces of the right and the far right. It is up to us to organise a rank and file struggle against racism and capitalism to counter that.

We can expect that this murderous attack will be used by the ruling class (and not only in France) to impose draconian measures on immigrants (or those who look like immigrants), activists and all of us, under the pretext of national unity and the fight against terrorism. The Vigipirate plan has already been raised to the highest level in the Paris region. This allows for bans on large demonstrations, and will encourage stop-and-search by armed personnel based on racial profiling, especially among the population of North African origin.

No way forward

The terrorists, just like the warlords who rape and pillage among defenceless populations in Africa and the Middle East, have no interest in the struggles of peoples in these regions, any more than they are concerned with the struggles of ordinary people, Muslim or non-Muslim, in France. The 'religion' of these terrorists consists of highly lucrative deals, for example, in the arms trade, or in human trafficking, which is big business for groups like Boko Haram and Islamic State.

At the same time, young people in Europe becoming radicalised along reactionary religious lines to the extent that they lose any sense of humanity and become terrorists, is not unconnected to the policies of their governments. These imperialists have been bombing some countries for years now, and have sown chaos and war for hundreds of millions of people all over the world.

But confronted with all this, it is not terrorism which will bring change - quite the contrary, it strengthens the position of the ruling class and traps entire populations in a state of fear. The answer is not to turn inwards and remain confined within communities, which is what both the traditional French far right and some religious groups want. What we need is a mass movement which is tolerant, militant and democratic.

Trade unions, and other labour movement organisations and associations should put out a call to rally and pay tribute to the victims of Charlie Hebdo on their own platform. They should stand for the unity of workers, youth and the great majority of the population regardless of their origin or

beliefs, for freedom of expression, against all reactionary and fundamentalist terrorists and against the racist and imperialist policies of French governments that increase sectarian divisions and intolerance.

A mass, unified movement against racism, and against the policies that force millions into insecurity, must be built. It is on that basis that we must show support for the journalists and employees of Charlie Hebdo and that we will continue to struggle against the government's austerity policies in the coming weeks and months.

Socialism

We are in favour of a tolerant and democratic society where everyone can live as they wish, according to the culture, the philosophy or the religion they choose. A democratic society such as this is possible but it requires us all to fight to destroy the roots of oppression and division. We must fight against capitalism, the law of profit, and the exploitation of workers and natural resources for the benefit of a tiny minority of super rich.

By taking the principal means of production and exchange out of the hands of the capitalists, and by organising society democratically, on the basis of public ownership and under the control and management of the working class and the population as a whole, we can put an end to inequality, war and injustice. This is what we defend - a democratic and socialist society, in total opposition to the endless barbarism which capitalism forces on us.

- This is an edited version of a statement available at www.socialistworld.net

Update: millions march for solidarity

Gauche Revolutionnaire

Nearly four million people marched on the streets of France on 11 January to express their disgust and grief against the attacks in Paris which killed 17 people last week. This is an unprecedented mobilisation on this kind of issue.

It is clear that a large majority wanted to be united in the face of the violence of terrorism, to reaffirm the right to freedom of speech and expression, but equally, to a large extent, their rejection of racism and division. The manoeuvres of the right and the extreme right to benefit from the emotion and the anger have failed.

'Unity'

When we hear talk of "national unity", there is always a danger. On the one hand government figures use it to cut across the opposition of workers and the population to their policies. On the other hand, journalists and politicians outbid each other with nationalism as if the country was going to war. This was the complete opposite of the feeling that dominated the marches in all the cities, often calm and silent but above all fraternal.

Some preferred, in view of the world leaders who were participating, to boycott the Paris demonstration.

Many were repulsed by the presence of the king of Saudi Arabia, where the crime of expressing an opinion is punishable by flogging or the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, whose army has caused the deaths of thousands of Palestinians, or the Turkish Prime Minister, Erdogan, who is a leading

supporter of IS in Syria, and many others who are the worst warmongers and gravediggers of freedom in their own countries.

This is understandable, but for our part we did not want to give up the street to the gestures of Valls and we preferred to be with the millions who were expressing their rejection of hatred and terrorism. We participated in the marches wherever we were, distributing our special supplement and not encountering any hostility.

We have to fight against racism in all its forms, from anti-Semitism to Islamophobia. And some politicians are stirring up hatred particularly against Muslims. According to a poll taken on 10 January, 66% reject the amalgam between "Muslims who live peacefully in France" and Islamists.

After the dramatic events of 7 and 9 January, the demonstration, its massive and fraternal nature, things mustn't be allowed to fall back. Workers and young people must be united to fight against racism, whatever their origin. For this, we cannot count on Valls, Holland and Sarkozy!

We must organise together to attack the root of the problem, the capitalist system, exploitation and impoverishment of the majority for the benefit of a small minority on which the system rests.

Sri Lankan elections: 'Butcher of the Tamils' Rajapaksa defeated

TU Senan, CWI

In the presidential election held on 8 January in Sri Lanka the incumbent, Mahinda Rajapaksa, suffered a fatal blow. The opposition candidate, Maithripala Sirisena, won with 51.3% against Rajapaksa's 47.6%.

Mahinda has become one of the most unpopular presidents in Sri Lanka's history, responsible for establishing dictatorial power in the hands of his very own Rajapaksa dynasty. They had become notoriously mired in corruption.

He is known as the destroyer of freedom of speech and democratic rights. After the way he ended the civil war in 2009 with the massacre of tens of thousands of Tamil people, he will be remembered as the butcher of the Tamils.

Competing influences

Since Rajapaksa came to power in 2005, Chinese investment and infrastructure development has played a key role in maintaining the much-required stability which helped him survive the last ten years.

Initially, the IMF did help to rescue the then deteriorating economy with a loan of \$2.7 billion when it was hit by crisis. However Western imperialism's support has diminished to the extent that the US gave a clear indication that they would like to see a 'regime change' and the cessation of Chinese influence.

This election has been seen as a contest between competing interests in the region - those of China, India and Western capitalist powers.

Although the economy has been growing at 7% - one of the fastest growing economies in the world - the masses had no feeling that the economy was going forward. The popular support that Mahinda enjoyed during the immediate post-war period among the Sinhala majority had begun to decline rapidly. They were all too aware of the rising prices, attacks on education and health etc.

A general understanding has developed among the masses that the Chinese investment was only strengthening the president's family and their wealth. Even a section of the capitalist class in Sri Lanka felt let down that they were excluded from any benefits of the investment and development.

Splits

Under his heavy fist of repression, the real face of the opposition was hidden, but it was revealed as soon as the election was called. A rift opened up within his own ranks and his long-time ally and the general secretary of the SLFP, his own party, came forward as the opposition candidate.

Not only the discriminated-against Tamils and Muslims would vote against Mahinda, but a new phenomenon developed in the south with many layers of the middle class moving against him.

He abused his control of the state machinery to make propaganda for himself. He prevented journalists and activists from travelling to Sri Lanka to observe and participate in the election.

Death threats were issued against human rights activists and the military was used to intimidate voters. Despite all of this, there was a high turn-out (around 75%) and many millions voted to kick Rajapaksa out.

'Get Mahinda out!' was the driving motivation - not a positive sentiment for Maithri. He maintained that he would follow Rajapaksa on security and protect the country and the Mahinda family from the war crimes investigation. He did however pledge to remove the executive presidency and return to a British-style democracy. He promised to discontinue some of the Chinese projects and investigate corruption.

Even Mahinda acknowledged that the masses merely faced a choice of two evils - or two devils. He urged a vote for himself, the 'known devil'!

Socialist challenge

USP member Siritunga 'Siri' Jayasuriya stood as an opposition candidate and was able to call meetings with up to 1,000 participating. He was the only candidate to stand for the rights of the Tamils to self-determination, withdrawal of troops from the north and east and no to privatisation.

In his campaign Siri exposed the inability of either of the two main camps - wedded to capitalism - to achieve what is needed for the majority of working and oppressed people. He also explained that, while executive powers must be abolished, returning to a British parliamentary system is not a solution. He promoted the demand for a revolutionary constituent assembly.

Siri received 8,840 votes - decent in the polarised and difficult situation. Winning the trust of the masses to vote for left and socialist candidates in Sri Lanka is a hard task because of the country's history of betrayals.

Now that the executive power is transferred to Maithri, the masses will expect change. It is very difficult to see how much he can change as long as the Mahinda family still maintains a grip on power.

A period of political uncertainty has opened up. It is more vital than ever to build the organisational strength of the masses to take the demands of the USP forward.

- For updates and more analysis see www.socialistworld.net
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Germany: what is behind Pegida?

Wolfram Klein, Socialist Alternative (SAV, CWI in Germany)

In recent weeks Germany has seen growing demonstrations in favour and against Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West).

The Pegida protests started in October in the east German city of Dresden, in Saxony. Weekly 'Monday demonstrations' in Dresden grew to include thousands. While there have been similar, much smaller, demonstrations in other towns, there has also been a much bigger wave of counter demonstrations of up to 35,000.

The Pegida Monday demonstrations are an attempt to copy a tradition from the revolution that began in autumn 1989 in the then Stalinist state of East Germany. Those Monday demonstrations started in Leipzig (also in Saxony) and soon became a mass movement throughout East Germany, playing a big role in the overthrow of the Stalinist regime.

Since then there have been several attempts to revitalise this tradition of protest. These latest Monday demonstrations use slogans from 1989 (especially "we are the people"), but they give them new and reactionary content.

Pegida tries to avoid the traditional far-right labels like anti-Semitism. In their original list of demands they claimed that they were in favour of the right of asylum for people who are persecuted or fleeing from war. They claim that they are only against economic refugees, criminal foreigners and so on. But such claims are only camouflage.

Nationalism

There are many factors behind the movement. At the beginning of the 1990s many people lost their jobs after the restoration of capitalism in East Germany. A layer became self-employed. They work hard to make ends meet and are afraid that their economic situation will worsen.

People can easily get the impression that Germany is an island of stability in a sea of crisis and get afraid that this island might get overwhelmed by the sea. So the fear of individual social decline combines with the fear of a collective social decline of Germany, and nationalism can be seen as some protection.

Two years ago a new party, AfD (Alliance for Germany), was founded in response to the Euro crisis, calling for exit from the Euro. There are right wing populist tendencies inside it. They have been elected to the European parliament and to three state parliaments in eastern Germany.

In the first eleven months of 2014 there was a 55% increase in the number of asylum seekers in Germany. In several places new shelters for asylum seekers were opened - in many cases leading to protests being organised by fascists and other racists.

An important factor is the feeling that the interests of easterners are not represented at the top. The ruling class is overwhelmingly west German, despite the fact that the two top official positions in the formal political structure, the president and chancellor, are currently held by east Germans.

Unfortunately the Left party, despite its generally strong electoral base in the east, has not been able to lead sustained campaigns that offer an alternative. In Saxony the Left party is dominated by its right wing. In Dresden the majority of Left party councillors even voted for the sale of all 48,000 council houses in 2006.

Counter-movement

Anti-fascists have been challenging attempts to replicate the Dresden Pegida protests elsewhere. Often there were blockades of thousands of people that prevented these demonstrations from marching. Members of SAV participated in these demonstrations from the beginning.

After the big anti-Pegida demonstrations on 5 January we produced a two page special edition of our paper with arguments against Pegida and proposals to build the movement against it.

We explain that racism is not only against immigrants but serves to split and weaken the working class. We call on the trade unions and Left party to organise a campaign against Pegida and racism with leaflets at workplaces and in housing areas. We also need rallies and a national demonstration.

We call for a joint fight of German and immigrant workers and unemployed people for education, welfare, housing and decent jobs, against state racism and for a democratic, socialist society.

London bus drivers unite in historic strike action

Bus workers in Unite in London are taking historic strike action today - for one rate for the job across all 18 companies. Strikers know this might have to be just the start and are ready for a big fight, but what a start! Picket lines of 70, 100 and more, maintained all day. And the roads - gridlock before dawn.

London mayor Boris Johnson claims a third of the service is running but that's complete rubbish - reports around the picket lines are that only 10% of the service is running, if that. Public support is really high - you know you're in the vicinity of a bus garage well before you get there, from the horns and cheers.

Paula Mitchell, London Socialist Party secretary

Putney

Bus drivers in Putney garage were very pleased with the picket turnout, there were around 70 drivers on it. A few of them had joined the picket only when they arrived and saw the picket line. Normally the road outside the garage is packed with buses going out on their route but today the road has been pretty empty of buses with probably about 100 buses parked up in the garage. There are very few buses on Putney High Street.

Socialist party leaflets and TUSC leaflets (Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition) have been welcomed by the strikers. Comments were made that a three-day strike is needed to really bring it home to management that the Unite members are serious about winning one rate across London.

Chris Newby

Stockwell

Around 30 pickets, all in good cheer, stood on the line at this Go Ahead garage. Reports of high turnouts at other depots contributed to the mood. Although there was some disappointment that more drivers were not out at Stockwell, very few services were running. Strikers saw this as a warm-up stoppage, and were looking forward to more and bigger action in the course of the dispute.

One talked about the appalling lack of break facilities he has suffered since being transferred to the number 19 route. Drivers have to eat their lunch sitting as passengers on other buses, or eat soggy sandwiches under an umbrella. Another picket showed colleagues a photo of the impressive Putney picket line and TUSC banner, leading to great interest in TUSC material. One rep took a bundle of leaflets for the canteen and another bought two copies of the Socialist to be shared around the picket line.

James Ivens

Leyton

One worker at Leyton bus garage told us that one of the bus companies is threatening to start new bus drivers on £9 an hour and not make them eligible for a pay rise until they've worked for 10 years! Only two workers had gone into work (about 400 work out of the garage) and no buses were running. About 50 workers were on the picket line - all determined to fight until they win.

Sarah Wrack

Unite LE/1111 housing branch secretary Suzanne Muna, who is standing for the vacant Unite London and Eastern national executive seat, visited the Leyton picket line. She gave solidarity greetings from her branch to the strikers on her way to a meeting of Unite's community youth workers and Not for Profit NISC.

Bow

There was a good sized picket line at Bow garage, despite the rain and cold. No buses went into central London. A few that did cross the picket line had massively shortened routes - presumably in TfL double speak that means the route is running, even if it doesn't cover most passengers!

Paul Williams, the Unite Rep at Bow garage said: "More than 50% of staff here are on top grade already, so the strike was a hard ask. But we had non-union members on the picket line, so we will recruit from this."

Pickets were angry with the different rates of pay, some talking about this being a long battle.

Pete Dickenson and Naomi Byron

Westbourne Park

Over 40 bus drivers were on the picket line cheering as every second car that drove past hooted in support. Bus drivers complained bitterly about how unfair it is that there are different pay rates for the same job.

One explained: "My manager told me I'm in the league table for the top 500 bus drivers in the country. Yet Tower is only paying me £11 an hour. I've been working as a bus driver for 11 years. This isn't work, it's slavery. We're being forced to work just to survive. We work seven days on, and then two days off. Each week we start our shifts at a different time".

"Every bus driver is going to feel this strike at the end of the week when they get their pay slips. But we've got no choice - we have to take this action to change things. That's why 99% of the 500 bus drivers who work here are taking part in the action. Don't believe the nonsense that they say about only 16% taking part".

The Unite union rep explained how he was being intimidated by management but that it is necessary to fight for equal pay across London.

Kevin Simpson

Holloway

Anthony Koumourou, Unite shop steward at Holloway garage, said: "The reason I am out here is to safeguard my job because the long term picture is that all the companies are going to be cutting each other's throats by reducing the salaries every time the routes come out for tender. They will introduce a new pay rate and new drivers will get the overtime on those routes because they won't pay the senior drivers.

"I don't think it's fair that two drivers can drive the same bus down the same road and one can earn £6,000 more than the other. We have three pay structures at the moment and there is nothing to stop the companies from introducing as many different pay rates as they want. All we are asking is for all the companies to sit round the table and discuss with us so there can be one rate for London. We are going to carry on until we win".

Steve Score

Barking

Socialist party members supported the 50 picketers outside Barking's main bus garage. The mood was good, especially when they heard other local garages were solid. Lots of people thought more action would be needed, two or three days next.

Joseph Mambuliya, Barking TUSC prospective parliamentary candidate, brought solidarity from the RMT union and spoke to the strikers about the campaign for a £10 an hour minimum wage to defeat poverty pay.

Helen Pattison

Ash Grove

Ash Grove garage in Hackney had a lively, strong picket line at the front entrance and a second one at the back. A few pickets said they have been driving buses for many years and receive the highest rates paid by any of the bus companies, but they fully realise the necessity of a united

strike of all drivers to bring the lower rates up to the same levels. They are angry that other workers doing exactly the same work are being paid less.

All the bus companies have roughly the same basic costs (fuel, garaging, new buses), they commented, so why do they have to pay different rates?

Also, if workers on higher rates move to a different bus company they may be forced onto a lower rate. Managers are dishing out 'cautions' more and more readily - including when drivers are involved in accidents that aren't their fault at all. For Arriva drivers, three cautions means a disciplinary hearing and possible dismissal, so drivers on higher rates could have to face working on a lower rate elsewhere.

One driver even received a caution for running over a watering can in the early morning dark in the depot. This kind of pressure from management has increased a lot in recent years, reducing the morale of bus workers.

They also drew attention to the fact that even the highest rates are not enough in London; it's impossible for any of them to buy a home anywhere near the Ash Grove garage. One nearby small house was seen on the market at £750,000.

Judy Beishon

West Ham

Over 70 bus drivers were on two solid pickets at West Ham garage. The garage manager was monitoring the pickets yet there were drivers filling in union application forms just yards from him.

There was a determined mood and the Socialist Party leaflet was received well.

Workers counted down the seconds to 7am when they could legally blow whistles and sound vuvuzelas!

RMT members came to the picket line in solidarity with the Unite members striking.

Rob Williams

New Cross

The 40 pickets at New Cross bus garage were happy that very few buses were running. They welcomed reports that police were stopping scab vehicles in other garages from travelling with too many passengers for safety reasons.

Management seemed more concerned at getting some kind of service in the City and West End so bus passengers going in the wrong direction were out of luck. Pickets were shouting: "What do we want? More money. When do we want it? Now".

Pickets were pleased with this show of strength but knew more action might be needed. Several people were saying that striking for two days might be needed if more action is considered.

Roger Shrives

Peckham

There were over 50 workers on an excellent picket line.

Lea Interchange

50 striking bus drivers gathered at Lea Interchange in Waltham Forest. Six strikers bought copies of the Socialist and seven said they want to find out more about the Socialist Party.

Ian Pattison

Wood Green

There was a good mood on the picket line. The shutters came down at the depot - a very good thing as there was no possibility of getting more buses out.

One driver said he'd only ever seen the shutters come down on Xmas day or when there are riots! The strike seemed very solid and it seems like the bus workers are prepared to come out again if necessary.

Nick Auvache

Uxbridge

The strike at Uxbridge garage was rock solid. Visits were made to the picket line from trade unionists in PCS, CWU, Unison and Unite local government.

Wally Kennedy

Battersea

50 bus workers were on the Battersea garage picket line.

Waterloo

Over 20 were on the picket line at the Waterloo depot, the strike was solid there. The only activity in the depot was being done by management. The mood was good and determined. Drivers seemed well up for a long battle if necessary. As one said: "The bus companies are a cartel stitching us up behind closed doors. We need to be as together as them".

Drivers did not know about TUSC before my visit, but expressed respect for Bob Crow who was one of the founders of TUSC. It was tanking it down so I left them with a dry package of TUSC and Socialist Party material for later perusal.

Steve Nally

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 13 January 2015 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Barbour strike: shift change exposes employer's 'family values'

Elaine Brunskill

Workers from Barbour's Gateshead warehouse are on four weeks of strike action against the imposition of changes to their terms and conditions.

On Friday 9 January around 100 strikers and supporters from the FBU, Unison, BFAWU bakers union and others participated in a march to Barbour's South Tyneside HQ.

One of the strikers commented that support for the strike was outstanding. He went on to say that Barbour management keep saying that the workers have been dragged into this action by Unite the union. Today's demo clearly shows this is not the case.

On the march the union's banner stated: "Family values not Barbour's values". This is in response to the company's website where they boast of being a business that honours "our Barbour family values".

Strikers at the warehouse said: "We've had these values preached to us over the years."

Many of the strikers have worked for the company for years, and feel shocked at the changed attitude of this "family orientated" company.

Gary Heaney, Unite shop steward, made the point that until recently Barbour's was regarded as a decent company to work for. However, he went on to say: "Now it feels all of a sudden it's about profit before people."

Strikers also commented that Barbour's advertising often showed families, albeit rich families, wearing their jackets. But if the changes go ahead it would have a detrimental effect on the workers' family life. Gary commented: "We would go from working to live, to living to work."

'Not our problem'

The main issue for the strikers is that Barbour is wanting to change shift patterns. Currently shifts run from 7.30am (or 8.30am) until 3.30pm (or 4.30pm). But Barbour wants workers to have a two-shift system. A dayshift between 6.30am and 3pm, and a backshift between 2.30pm and 11pm.

This has stunned the workforce, particularly because the industrial estate is in a really isolated location, with extremely poor public transport links. Workers who have raised issues around the safety of staff having a 15 minute walk along a desolate road in the dark were told by one of the company's directors: "At the end of the day that's not our problem."

Barbour is also attempting to impose a system whereby workers would be paid for 39 hours per week, but only work 37.5 hours. The excess hours would be banked, then at Barbour's discretion workers would be pulled into work when needed. This would mean the workforce being compelled to work weekends without any additional overtime pay.

In taking four weeks of industrial action Barbour strikers are showing they are serious about fighting these proposed changes.

- Any messages of support to Gary Heaney: 07414 945 640
- Donations to Unite, 55 Call Lane, Leeds. LS1 7BU. Cheques made payable to Unite the Union (clearly marked as a donation for the Barbour Dispute).

Update - 14.01.15: Barbour workers have won a victory and ended the strike following a new offer from management over shift patterns and pay. The strikers have returned to work today after voting to accept the deal.

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 9 January 2015 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Tesco: supermarket workers need a fighting union leadership

Scott Jones, Candidate for Usdaw executive South Wales and Western division

Tesco's first trading statement of 2015 brought further profits warnings, news of cuts and further attacks on workers.

The supermarket giant is set to close 43 'unprofitable' stores, mostly smaller Tesco Expresses, reduce and relocate its head office and do away with the final salary pension scheme for all staff.

However, Tesco's profit predictions remain high at £1.4 billion. Its market share remains almost three times that of discounters Lidl and Aldi combined.

Despite this Tesco is attempting to return to super-profits on the backs of its already low-paid workers.

Scandalously, the Usdaw shopworkers' union issued a statement saying that it "recognises that change is inevitable" and "noting the difficulties facing Tesco". The union should be defending its members - not defending the employer!

In contrast, Unite, which represents many Tesco drivers, demands that Tesco workers should not be made to pay for the failure in the boardroom.

Majority union

However, Usdaw represents the overwhelming majority of Tesco and other supermarket workers. These workers now need a fighting leadership prepared to take on the bosses more than ever.

In the union's upcoming elections Socialist Party members will be building support for the candidates endorsed by the union's Broad Left.

These include two Socialist Party members and Tesco workers standing for the executive committee. I am standing for the South Wales and Western division and Amy Murphy is standing for re-election in the Southern division and for president.

Workplace news in brief

Wales FE strike

Further Education union members in Wales delivered a mandate for strike action over pay in ballots that closed on 5 January.

The willingness of members in campus unions to support action has already led to the employers, represented by Colegau Cymru, revising their position. Before Christmas they were saying there would be no cost of living increase this year; now the unions have received a provisional offer (still to be confirmed) of a 1% across the board rise.

This still falls a long way short of the collective claim we submitted for the greater of 3% or £1,000.

Unison estimates the value of our wages have fallen 16% since 2010. As one member told me: "**** all plus 1% of **** all is still ****" all!

Ronnie Job, FE Unison steward

Lambeth College

Lambeth College lecturers are hoping for solidarity in their struggle from an unlikely source - schools inspector Ofsted.

Three consecutive days of strike action started on 13 January at the south London college. Members of the University and College Union have been fighting contract changes since last term. Attacks include reducing sick pay and holiday, and increasing working hours for no extra money.

Management has been silent on likely Ofsted results. Several managers are reported to have recently resigned. Pressure from the regulator could help resolve what has been a difficult and protracted dispute.

James Ivens

A new era for New Era

How tenants and campaigners won against big landlords

Residents of the New Era estate in east London made headlines last year with their campaign against sell-offs and rent hikes.

Here two campaigners respond to latest developments.

Paul Kershaw, Unite LE 1111 housing workers' branch

Headlines such as "Rent control from below" greeted the victory for New Era tenants who have stopped the US-based property company Westbrook from tripling rents and driving tenants out. This victory shows that when tenants organise themselves and stand together they are strong.

But the future remains uncertain and the struggle is a reminder of the insecurity faced by all private sector tenants. This is a legacy of the Thatcher government that took away secure tenancies and rent control for private tenants. Reversing this attack would be a minimum first step to address the housing crisis - but it is a step none of the establishment parties support.

Congratulating the tenants, Hackney Socialist Party member Brian Debus wrote: "You have evicted the richest Tory MP and private property speculating profiteers Westbrook. This goes to prove we are many and they are few. Your victory will be an inspiration to millions of others fighting against a rapacious profit system that this Tory government is only too happy to promote."

The new landlord, the Dolphin Square Foundation, is a charity that has given an assurance that rents will not be increased in the short run. But it charges 'intermediate' rather than social rents on its other properties and prospective tenants are asked to demonstrate that their income is high enough to mean they won't have to claim housing benefit.

If the Dolphin Square Foundation implements a similar model on the New Era estate considerable rent rises will be demanded in the future. A three bedroom flat in the New Era estate is £340 a week - £200 less than on a comparable estate run by Dolphin.

Housing associations

Dolphin is not a regulated housing association so their tenants have less protection than normal housing association tenants. Even this wouldn't be a guarantee of decent treatment. For example, Peabody, a long established housing association, took over 1,000 'intermediate rent' properties from the Crown Estate and has increased rents by a staggering 36% over the last four years.

Big housing associations are making record surpluses and have huge resources. It is a significant indicator of their increasingly commercial approach that none stepped in to prevent New Era's tenants facing eviction. It is also instructive that the Labour council, while making supportive noises, did not step in to give tenants security by turning the estate into council housing.

Politicians expressed concern at the plight of New Era tenants. But when Unite the union tried to raise the issue as an emergency motion at the London Labour Party conference it was ruled out-of-order.

Before 1989 private tenants had secure tenancies with the right to take their landlords to 'fair rent' tribunals. Some people who have old tenancies still have this right - a few tenants on the New Era estate were protected in this way. It would be legislatively easy to reintroduce this protection as an emergency measure.

Labour failed to address this issue during its time in government. Now the party opposes rent control while backing 'build to rent' schemes that support private landlords. This is all further evidence that Labour has now become another neoliberal party.

The fighting spirit shown by New Era tenants and a number of other 'anti-social cleansing' housing campaigns in London shows the potential for a party of working class campaigners. A party that called for nationalising the banks and a big programme of high quality council house building would gain a massive echo in London and beyond.

Interview

"Fight back and stick together"

The Socialist spoke to Lindsey Garrett, one of the residents of the New Era estate.

The estate was sold to private investors Westbrook Partners and Benyon Estates in July 2014. They wanted to refurbish and to triple rents to market value (£600 a week). No one could afford that - it would have meant eviction.

Tenants were first shocked, upset and angry. We organised ourselves and set up a tenants association to look at ways to fight it. We had a lot of support from yourselves [the Socialist Party], Unison, Unite, FBU, the local priest, the local community and, of course, Russell Brand. People across the country were very supportive.

There were lots of campaign highlights - the march against Benyon Estates and them pulling out, the march to Downing Street where we handed in our petition with 300,000 signatures. Then Westbrook's decision to sell the estate to a housing association.

We have a letter from the Dolphin Square Foundation (the new owners) asking to meet up as soon as possible. The letter said there will be no change to rents until 2016. The rents will be on longer term contracts. Rents will be means tested and no more than 40% of income. Some of us should have rent reductions - for example if you are on £1,500 a month, rent should be no more than £600 a month which is a reduction on what we are paying now.

We are aware of the previous links between the Dolphin Square Foundation and Westbrook Partners so we will approach them with trepidation and be cautious. They know what we campaigned for and know we are not just going to accept their terms. We want affordable rents for everyone.

In the private sector we need rent caps and long term, affordable leases - the same as council tenants. There needs to be more building of council housing - money has to be invested into it.

I will stay very involved with the future decisions affecting the estate. We will keep the tenants association going. There is a march leaving from here on 31 January to highlight the whole of the housing crisis, linked to the March for Homes in South London.

I really think our campaign highlights to people what can be done by coming together and taking direct action. We all need to fight back and stick together, get to know our neighbours. We will keep getting the message out there.

I will give consideration in the New Year to standing in the election as an anti-establishment candidate.

► **March for Homes!**

Saturday 31 January, 12 noon

Elephant and Castle, march to City Hall

- East London feeder march: St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, 12 noon
- Short or static protest (organised by Disabled People Against Cuts): Potters Field, Tooley St, 1.30pm

► **Hackney Socialist Party public meeting - New Era victory, housing for all!**

7.30pm, Wednesday 28 January,

Stag pub (side room), 55 Orsman Rd, N1 5RA

Speakers: Lindsey Garrett, chair New Era campaign and Paul Kershaw, chair Unite LE 1111 housing workers' branch

Haringey: A strange way to protect public services

John Dolan, Haringey council worker

I work in a day centre for adults with learning disabilities in Haringey, north London. Three of our four day centres are now due to be closed, with the one remaining day centre being privatised (or becoming a 'Social Enterprise Model'), as part of the Labour-led council's three year budget plan.

The proposal states: "Efficiencies will be made at the remaining day centre to bring its cost in line with those of other providers." Haringey Labour is open about competing in the race to the bottom!

Yet two days before the May 2014 local government elections, London Unison members received the following text message: "London votes on Thursday. Vote against public service cuts. Vote Labour."

On election day, Unison sent out another text: "Not voted yet? Don't waste it. Vote for public services, vote Labour."

Any Haringey Unison member who followed the text advice must surely now be confused. Since increasing its majority in the 2014 local elections, Haringey Labour has proposed further cuts of £70 million - 25% of its current budget - up to March 2018, on top the £117 million cut since 2010.

These proposals, called "Building a Stronger Haringey Together"(!), could lead to one-quarter of remaining staff being axed.

All parts of Haringey's public service provision - youth services, elderly services and everything in between - are at risk.

For the last four years, Labour nationally has blamed all of the cuts on the Con-Dems, but now it is on the verge of getting elected to government it is preparing the ground for Labour austerity. Haringey learning disabilities professionals have claimed these proposed cuts will mean Haringey council won't meet its statutory legal requirements!

I now face the prospect of being made redundant or having my department privatised by a Labour council, possibly under a Labour government. Trade unions shouldn't back austerity by a Labour government; they should be doing what we pay them to do - representing our members' interests.

I'm proud that I stood as a TUSC candidate in the May 2014 council elections, and I'll continue the fight for a political voice that represents the interests of the working class - while I'm also fighting Haringey's Labour cuts!

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 9 January 2015 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Sedgehill School besieged by privateers

Martin Powell-Davies, Secretary, Lewisham National Union of Teachers

In Lewisham, we will be keeping up our fight to oppose academy plans that could threaten the break-up of local authority schooling right across the borough. Our campaign has already shown the strength of opposition to academisation.

On 9 January, the Department for Education (DfE) finally gave the go-ahead to Lewisham's Labour council to remove the governors of Sedgehill School and replace them with their chosen appointees. However, the huge campaign to support the school (see issue 838) has still had an effect. The original plan to replace the existing head with management from Bethnal Green Academy has had to be shelved.

Community

The school and its community did not want this new Interim Executive Board (IEB). If the DfE have their way, the IEB could be a step towards turning Sedgehill into an academy. Any attempt to impose academisation would be met with outrage from the teachers, parents and students who protested so vociferously in December.

In an indicative ballot, National Union of Teachers (NUT) members at Sedgehill - and four other schools - voted by an overwhelming majority to show their willingness to strike against any such change in their employment status. As we have heard no indication that this will not be the case, the NUT has given notice that a formal ballot for strike action will now follow.

IEB, Council and DfE - take note!

Freedom Riders ride again

Sharron Milsom, Sheffield North Socialist Party

Rotherham town hall was flooded by angry pensioners demanding free travel on 5 January.

The 45 "Freedom Riders" lobbied the budget-setting meeting of Labour-controlled Sheffield City Region Combined Authority. We were at Rotherham town hall not only to continue our campaign for the reinstatement of pensioners' free train travel and bus concessions (see previous issues), but to oppose all the cuts we knew they were about to impose.

After a noisy protest outside we filled the public gallery. Councillors outlined their plans to close travel information centres, cut cleaning at interchanges and scrap paper bus timetables. Bus shelters are to be cleaned only once every three months. In all 40 jobs are to go.

A freedom rider addressed the meeting, pointing out the authority has £12 million in its reserves. This is more than enough to continue the current level of service and reinstate travel concessions.

Reserves

Labour chair Sir Steve Houghton replied that these reserves need to last several years. Obviously he's not confident an incoming Labour government will reverse the cuts. Neither are we - but we're fighting austerity, not accepting it. It seems he's OK with filthy interchanges and even more unemployment.

Houghton argued he could have decided to cut all pensioners' and disabled people's concessions but didn't. Yes - if we'd not kept up our campaign, what concessions we won back last June would have been at risk again. But this is not enough: we want all our concessions back!

We're not letting Northern Rail off the hook either. They wanted £239,000 to provide free rail travel for pensioners - yet already get £780 million in public subsidy! Freedom riders have been out with RMT members campaigning against fare rises.

Dozens of protesters took their latest 'freedom ride' - travelling without paying - on 8 December.

- Read more about the campaign at www.socialistparty.org.uk.

Join the socialists to fight privatisation

Sarah Sachs-Eldridge, Socialist Party national organiser

They're everywhere! Money-grubbing, private claws - sinking talons into our public services and workers' pay and conditions.

Circle's withdrawal from Hinchingsbrooke Hospital (see page 3) shows what privatisation means for the NHS. Patients' and workers' needs are trodden underfoot in the stampede towards profit. This is anathema to how working class people see the NHS and our public services.

The magnificent strike by London bus drivers, demanding one rate for the job, highlights this too. The break-up of services into different private companies is used as a weapon against hard-won workers' rights. Like in every race, the race to the bottom in wages, conditions and rights delivers winners and losers. The bosses and shareholders of the bus companies win, and workers suffer.

In poll after poll it's clear that working class people reject privatisation. Protest and strike reports in the Socialist prove workers will take action when given a lead. At every stage, the Socialist Party proposes a strategy that puts the potential strength of workers' united struggle at its centre.

When organised, the working class is a powerful social force capable of forcing concessions from employers. In 2012, a London bus workers' strike won an Olympic bonus that the bosses had no intention of paying.

The Socialist Party explains that privatisation is a logical approach for the super-rich. The capitalists grab a greater share of wealth from workers - both in the form of lower wages, and in payments from councils and governments for services.

The Socialist Party therefore fights to end privatisation through mass action by workers. We also campaign for representatives in councils and government who would reject and reverse privatisation. We fight to transform society; to end the rule of profit.

Can you join us to make our voice stronger?

Visit socialistparty.org.uk/join, email join@socialistparty.org.uk, text 0776 1818 206 or call 020 8988 8777.

Fighting fund targets smashed

Ken Douglas, Socialist Party national treasurer

The final quarter of fighting fund collection in 2014 surpassed all expectations. We raised a magnificent £34,745 - 138% of the national target - in the three months up to Christmas. Members worked hard to ensure the Socialist Party has the resources it needs.

It was also thanks to all members and supporters who donated hard-earned cash to the Socialism 2014 appeal. In Wales over £3,000 was raised for the Andrew Price memorial appeal, a fitting testament to his life-long dedication as a socialist and the high regard he was held in.

Tireless work

Branches worked tirelessly to raise finance on weekly campaign stalls, getting a good response to our call for a £10-an-hour minimum wage and ending zero-hour contracts. The North West held daily stalls around the region in a "collectathon" week, raising over £500. Liverpool alone hit nearly 400% of its target with at least twice-weekly stalls, car-boot sales and donations from supporters.

Members also came up with imaginative fund-raising ideas. Andrew Walton ran the Leicester marathon, selling over 40 copies of the Socialist and raising fighting fund as he went. Dave Gorton in Chesterfield raised over £100 with a calendar marking revolutions in history (still available). And members in East London raised over £300 with their latest recipe book, *Steak and Revolution*.

Over £10,000 was collected around Christmas as branches held fund-raising parties and raffles, and dug out loose-change jars. As a result we also smashed the annual target - raising £112,847, the best performance for three years.

Campaigning

The fighting fund is vital to enable us to produce campaigning materials and participate in demonstrations and protests. For example, the 18 October TUC demo cost us over £5,000 in placards, posters, banners, gazebos and leaflets.

The Socialist Party has launched an election appeal for £50,000 (see page 3) in addition to the £25,000 target for the first three months of this year. Branches will have to plan carefully to ensure that fighting fund is maintained and 2015 is an even better year.

Book review

Eleanor Marx - a life

Clare Doyle reviews 'Eleanor Marx - A Life' by Rachel Holmes

Eleanor Marx was an extraordinary woman - youngest daughter of an extraordinary man, Karl Marx, and of Jenny, his lifelong partner through revolution and counter-revolution.

Many socialists know of Eleanor's tremendous role in the preparation and publication of Marx's great work, *Das Kapital*, completing the task with Marx's close friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels. We are also familiar with her involvement in building mass working class organisations in Britain at the end of the 19th century, in the great strikes of that period and in both the First and Second Internationals.

But this book brings out the tireless devotion and energy she dedicated to these tasks. She was not only preparing leaflets, posters, resolutions, reports, addressing meetings, conducting classes and fearlessly leading demonstrations but translating material and interpreting from and into a number of different languages. On top of that Eleanor Marx was meticulously organising telegraph and postal communications within Britain and around the world.

This book is not so much a political biography as a biography of an outstanding person who was - almost from her birth in 1855 - extremely political. It is sometimes tediously detailed on her personal life but gives a living picture of the Marx family's life. It shows the tragedies, illnesses and deaths as well as the delights in the works of Goethe and Shakespeare, walks on Hampstead Heath, opera visits etc.

The author has made a meticulous study of apparently all the available source material, especially Eleanor's own writings - letters and diaries - and those of close, mostly female, friends.

It is frustratingly short on politics, just a few sentences about the momentous Paris Commune of 1871. Even these concentrated on the fact that the near revolution saw women playing a significant, and at times equal, role in the fighting.

The book is clearly that of a feminist author with left-wing sympathies but has hardly a word about the political and historical issues she debated with her father and the numerous visitors to their home in London.

On Ireland, Eleanor, along with the second major influence in her political life, Friedrich Engels, stood against the stream in championing the rights of the Irish to break from British imperial rule. Also, like him, she believed that men and women should be able to live together without the bonds of marriage.

Family

Eleanor felt strongly about childbearing and domestic chores hampering the development of women including her own sisters. Nevertheless, she enjoyed little more than having her nieces and nephews to stay with her; she would drop everything to go to the aid of her sisters and their children when they were ill or hounded by the authorities (as in France).

Like many younger daughters of the time, Eleanor was expected to stay at home to help with various responsibilities and discouraged from pursuing early romances. This included, in Eleanor's

case, with the French revolutionary, Lissagaray - her first lover and a man with whom she shared her life for some years and co-wrote the history of the Paris Commune.

Later, in spite of efforts by her friends, Eleanor could not be discouraged from setting up home with Edward Aveling. He was a socialist but had a poor reputation for his personal behaviour - profligate (with other people's money) and dishonest.

It was Eleanor's discovery that Aveling had secretly married someone else while living with her that tragically drove her to take her own life on 31 March, 1898.

Apart from her tremendous contribution to the socialist and workers' movement, Eleanor Marx participated energetically in numerous activities - acting, translating literary as well as political works and defending writers like Ibsen and Flaubert when they came under attack from conservative critics. She herself wrote important political works such as "The working class movement in America" after an exhausting four month speaking tour of 15 states in the US.

Eleanor's life was impressive and inspiring for all socialists; her premature death a tragedy.

The straightwashing of Pride

Ben Golightly, Swansea Socialist Party

I thoroughly enjoyed seeing *Pride* (2014) at the cinema last year. The film dramatises the solidarity between LGBT and mining communities during the 1984-85 miners' strike.

However, like many people, I was frustrated by the news that the US release hid all reference to sexuality on the packaging. It referred to "Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners" only as "activists" and removed the group's banner from the promotional image.

Too often we are fed the cynical idea of the "pink pound" by lobbying groups like the (misnamed!) Stonewall: that LGBT liberation can be advertised by companies and bought by consumers.

Profits

Socialists know that the market only cares about profits. This time US distributors saw more profit in "straightwashing" an excellent film, blaming "an unfortunate commercial reality".

Liberation can't be left passively in the hands of big business. *Pride* demonstrated how powerful the workers' movement can be when it unites against oppression, with the National Union of Mineworkers playing a key part in the fight for LGBT rights.

The Socialist Party raises the need to rebuild these militant traditions and build a workers' movement united against the prejudices of today's society, linking up with oppressed groups in struggle.

- *Pride* was reviewed in the Socialist, 17 September 2014, See www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/19233
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<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/19930>