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11,000 families evicted in three months

Cut rents not benefits

Simon Carter

Eleven thousand families were thrown out of their accommodation in the first three months of 2015. This is a 51% increase compared to six years ago.

These evictions are due to excessive rents, coupled to low pay and to government benefit cuts.

Around half of those affected lived in London where the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom home is £2,216.

Yet the government response to this housing crisis is to make matters even worse. It will further cap welfare payments and end the limited housing benefit currently available to under-21s claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

The only group of people profiting from this misery is private landlords, who can charge tenants what they like due to the absence of rent controls. These 'winners' also get a public subsidy, amounting to over £1,000 per household each year, by pocketing housing benefit and getting generous tax concessions.

This shouldn't come as any surprise as, at the time of the general election, one-in-four MPs, including Labour MPs, were also private landlords.

Unaffordable

It's become nigh-on impossible for families earning average wages to buy a home. According to the homeless charity Shelter, 80% of homes nationally are unaffordable to the average income family, with only 43 properties deemed genuinely affordable in London. Meanwhile, housebuilding has slumped to its lowest levels since the 1920s.

But if it's impossible to buy and increasingly impossible to rent in the private sector, what is the alternative?

Council houses are becoming rarer than rhinos as local authorities continue to sell off housing stock under the government's heavily subsidised 'right to buy' policy. These homes are not replaced with housing that charges 'social' rents, ie 50% of market rents.

Now, the government also wants to extend this sell-off to 1.3 million housing association homes.

Having a roof over your head should be a fundamental human right. But this government of millionaires only represents the money-making interests of the country's super-rich.

We need to kick out this anti-working class government and fight for one with socialist policies. The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition stood in the elections to put that alternative. These policies must include:

- Rent controls to stop excessive rents and reduce the housing benefit bill

- Increasing the minimum wage to £10 an hour
 - Ending benefit caps and punitive benefit sanctions
 - A massive programme of council house building
 - Nationalise the major banks and giant construction companies to finance this housing programme
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Tory war on youth

■ Protest at re-opening of parliament on 27 May

Ian Pattison, Youth Fight for Jobs

Shock and disgust at the election of a Tory government has quickly turned into anger and action.

Thousands of mainly young people have already taken to the streets against a government with no mandate for austerity. Only 24% of the electorate voted Conservative, with 16 and 17-year-olds denied the right to vote.

At the moment the Tories are riding high on their surprise win. This will make them overshoot themselves, trying to force through austerity measures that have no support.

They have already announced devastating plans. At least another £30 billion in cuts - including slashing £12 billion from welfare.

Young people

Part of this will be a war on young people. Unemployed 18 to 21-year-olds will be refused benefits if they don't sign up to a 'work for your dole' scheme. Either they start a poverty-pay apprenticeship, or do 30 hours a week unpaid 'community work' plus ten hours' job search.

Housing benefit will be removed from all under-21s. Overnight, thousands more could be turfed out onto the streets.

Youth Fight for Jobs is calling protests across the country on Wednesday 27 May, when the Tories announce these plans in the Queen's speech at the re-opening of parliament.

Living standards are lower today than five years ago - for the first time since records began. Exploitative zero-hour contracts and poverty pay are now the norm for many young people. Tuition fees have tripled to £9,000 and decent housing costs a small fortune.

Austerity isn't all bad, of course. The wealth of Britain's thousand richest individuals has doubled - to £547 billion since the start of the economic crisis.

This government can be beaten. Thatcher was brought down by a mass movement against the hated and unfair poll tax. 18 million refused to pay what was in reality a fine for being poor.

Cameron and his friends were terrified when hundreds of thousands of students marched and occupied for free education. They were shaken by the two million public sector workers striking in 2011.

Firefighters, bus drivers and railway staff have all been on strike this year, with many others. Thousands marching in civil disobedience on the streets - linked with workers taking strike action - can stop austerity.

The Socialist Party demands

- End austerity - no to five more years of cuts to jobs, education and public services
- Reverse welfare cuts - no compulsory 'workfare' for 18 to 21-year-olds - defend housing benefit
- Fight poverty pay - raise the minimum wage to £10 an hour now - scrap zero-hour contracts
- Defend education - no to cuts, privatisation and tuition fees
- Democratic rights - stop attacks on the right to strike, protest and our civil liberties - for proportional representation and votes at 16

Protest against the Queen's speech

Wednesday 27 May

London: 4.30pm at Downing Street

Protests happening in towns and cities up and down the country - check out youthfightforjobs.com to find one near you!

Show your support

- Click 'attending' on the national Facebook event
- Share with your friends
- Join the protests on the day

Get involved

- Text 'JOIN' plus your name and postcode to 0774 937 9010
- Facebook Youth Fight for Jobs
- Twitter @youthfight4jobs
- Email youthfightforjobs@gmail.com

Increasing state clampdowns -

Stop the "elites fortifying their power"

No Place To Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA and the US Surveillance State by Glenn Greenwald is reviewed by Tony Saunois, secretary of the Committee for a Workers' International

This powerful, gripping and incisive book was first published on 13 May 2014. Glenn Greenwald and, of course, his star whistleblower, Edward Snowden, have done a tremendous service in revealing the unimaginable scale of surveillance and repression being perpetrated in the USA, Britain and other countries. My regret is not reading this work when it was first published.

Greenwald details the drama that unfolded over the release of Snowden's revelations. He also debunks the myth that surveillance should only be of concern to those acting in the wrong, and he fully exposes the role of the corporate media in protecting the interests of the surveillance state and its rich and powerful backers.

The sheer scale of information being collected on the world's population by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and its collaborating security services in other countries revealed by the Snowden leaks is staggering. NSA collects data from billions of emails and phone conversations. A branch of the NSA, Global Access Operations, in a one month period collected data on three billion calls and emails.

In fact, so much information is collected it is impossible for the security services to use it all. GCHQ complains they have not enough storage space to house what they have intercepted.

Life is richer than fiction: the real life events that involved Edward Snowden and Glenn Greenwald and the publication of these revelations have all the drama and excitement of the best international master spy novel.

Snowden first contacted Greenwald on 1 December 2012. He made it clear he wanted no gain or publicity from his actions and "did not want the story to be about him". He wanted to "spark a worldwide debate on privacy, internet freedom and the dangers of state surveillance".

The book reveals the motives of Snowden and his political evolution. It speaks volumes about the effects that modern day capitalism is having in shaping the outlook of even those sections of the middle class who are in the employ of the system - in Snowden's case the state machine - the CIA and NSA.

Snowden concluded: "When marginalised youth commit minor infractions, we as a society turn a blind eye as they suffer insufferable consequences in the world's largest prison system, yet when the richest and most powerful telecommunications providers in the country knowingly commit tens of million felonies, Congress passes our nation's first law providing their elite friends with full retroactive immunity - civil and criminal."

Honest

The 29-year old Snowden emerges as a highly intelligent and honest individual who is motivated by a very strong sense of what is just. As a result of his experiences, Snowden reached important conclusions. Like many Americans, 9/11 drove him initially in a more 'patriotic' direction. In 2004 he joined the US army and saw the Iraq war as a "noble" objective to remove a dictator. However, during training he heard more talk of killing Arabs than removing a dictator. It disillusioned him and he was discharged after breaking both legs in training.

However, he believed in the "goodness of US government". By 2005 he became a technical expert with the CIA. Through this he gained access to secret files. He watched drone surveillance of people they might then kill and the NSA tracking the internet as people typed. What he saw repelled him.

Initially he had high expectations that the election of Obama would see things change especially on the issue of state surveillance. However, these hopes were dashed and he drew more radical conclusions. "Then it became clear Obama was not just continuing, but in many cases expanding these abuses. I realised I couldn't wait for a leader to fix these things."

Greenwald quotes Snowden's powerful statement: "the true measurement of a person isn't what they say they believe in, but what they do in defence of those beliefs."

Snowden revealed himself as a whistleblower, risked his long term personal relationship, (with a partner who was unaware of his action in order to protect her), gave up a \$200,000 yearly salary and secure living in Hawaii and faced the threat of imprisonment or worse in "defence of his principles". Snowden did this fully aware of the personal consequences.

The reality of the Obama administration led to massive disillusionment, and in turn to a large part of US society looking to the left and to socialist ideas, which was reflected in the election of socialist Kshama Sawant to Seattle city council in 2014. Glenn Greenwald recently called for Kshama Sawant to be re-elected.

Obama, as Greenwald explains, used the Espionage Act 1917 (which was introduced to round up opponents of World War One) to prosecute more government whistleblowers than any other US administration! Obama used a Presidential directive to prepare offensive cyberspace operations.

One of the repressive pieces of legislation used by successive US administrations has been the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) introduced in 1978. This establishes a secret court which makes secret rulings on government actions and interventions. It was this Orwellian regime which finally allowed Verizon Business to hand over to the NSA the phone records of tens of millions of US citizens.

Greenwald outlines how he had to confront state harassment and repression during his work with Snowden. Laptops mysteriously disappeared from his home in Rio, encryption equipment sent to him by from abroad was held for "reasons unknown" at border controls - all part of this real life intelligence drama.

International web

The vast international web of the surveillance state and collaboration with other states' security services, like the GCHQ listening station in Gloucestershire England, is exposed.

The use of "anti-terrorist" legislation against legitimate protesters and others is also clearly shown. The arrest of Greenwald's partner, David Miranda, at London's Heathrow airport is an illustration of how such legislation can be used. Miranda was arrested using anti-terrorist legislation which defines terrorism as an action "designed to influence a government and is made for the purposes of promoting a political or ideological cause." Thus it can cover any political opponents of a government.

The book gives many examples of how the fear of surveillance can also be used as a weapon to intimidate people from expressing their opinions or joining protests. It is all part of the "elites fortifying their power", as Greenwald puts it, in the face of growing opposition and protest following the economic crisis and greater turmoil which exists internationally.

Greenwald is scathing about the role of the pro-establishment media outlets and house trained journalists. He denounces what he refers to as "middle-of-the-road-ese" which always gives great weight to official claims. The New York Times and Washington Post never speak about US methods of torture in Iraq but only refer to "interrogation" techniques.

Greenwald also spells out the conscious attempts to discredit whistleblowers or journalists, to sow doubt and demonise. It was done to both Snowden and Greenwald. Greenwald was branded a "loner" who "can't keep friends for long". He was referred to as a "blogger" or "activist" to attempt to downgrade the significance of what he has revealed. Some even demanded his imprisonment should he return to the USA. Snowden was dismissed as "unstable".

The significance of this book - what it reveals about the nature of the surveillance state, the fourth estate (mass media) and the ruling elite should not be underestimated. Maybe all of the conclusions have not been drawn about how a mass movement can be built to combat heightened surveillance and repression, and the elite it is aimed at protecting.

However, the publication of this book and Snowden's revelations are a tremendous assistance to those working to build such a movement. Do not miss the opportunity to read it, to help understand what the 1% are doing to try to defend their interests. It is also a testimony to the determination and courage of people like Edward Snowden to expose what they rightly think is wrong.

You can order *No Place to Hide* for £9.99 plus £2p&p from Left Books: 020 8988 8789

www.leftbooks.co.uk

Editorial from the Socialist 856

Build a movement to defeat the government's savagery

When Maggie Thatcher first spoke from the steps of Downing Street as prime minister in 1979 she quoted Francis of Assisi, promising to bring harmony and hope. Instead she ruled ruthlessly in the interests of the 1% - the capitalist class. Cameron's promise last week to rule as a 'one nation' prime minister is a lie on the same scale.

Elected by just 24.4% of eligible voters, the smallest percentage of voters of any Tory government since 1918, Cameron and co have no mandate for the attacks they intend to carry out against the majority of working class people. But this will not stop them.

Only a mass movement of opposition to the Tories savagery will force them back. In order to try and prevent such a movement the government is also going to propose further undemocratic restrictions on trade unions' right to strike, alongside other anti-democratic measures including the abolition of the Human Rights Act.

However, the trade unions are the largest democratic organisations in Britain with six million members. If they mobilised their potential power they could not only prevent the introduction of new anti-trade union and other undemocratic laws, but could play the central role in a movement against austerity powerful enough to defeat the government.

In the Queen's speech on 27 May the first round of misery will be announced, closely followed by a second round in a special budget on 8 July. Huge cuts in public spending are promised. In the last parliament all departments, except health and education, suffered funding cuts of over 20%. The Tories plan to repeat at least the same scale of cuts again.

This will include further cuts in benefits, from which the Tories have pledged to slash an astronomical £12 billion. It is rumoured that this could include an increase in the hated bedroom tax.

The Tory lie - that Labour has criminally gone along with - is that benefit claimants are all scroungers. In reality working class people fought for the right to claim benefits when they were in

need in order to provide a vital safety net against the brutality of a capitalist system where workers could be thrown out of their jobs at a moment's notice.

If the Tories succeed in destroying that safety net we will be pushed back to the 1930s, when those who couldn't earn enough to live starved.

The benefit cuts over the last five years have already left millions of people in desperate straits. Almost a million have had no choice but to go to food banks in order to feed themselves and their families. Homelessness has rocketed.

Further misery

The next round of benefit cuts will mean further misery for benefit claimants in work, as well as those who are unable to do so. In Britain today levels of employment have increased, yet 38% of working-age households claim benefits. The vast majority are working, but are so low paid that they cannot afford to make ends meet without claiming tax credits. Last year, for example, £11 billion in tax credits was claimed by low paid workers in the major supermarkets.

The answer of course, would be to implement the Socialist Party's demand for a £10 an hour minimum wage, thereby lifting millions of low paid workers out of the 'benefit trap'. This, however, would make the giant corporations that the Tory Party acts for pay more. So the government will not increase the minimum wage at all - or only marginally - but will cut the benefits that millions rely on to get by.

On top of all this will be further cuts to local council funding. So desperate is the situation, even the Tory-led Local Government Association - representing local authorities - is begging Osborne to stay his axe. In a letter to the Observer they state that they have already suffered cuts of "40% since 2010 and cannot find more savings without serious consequences for community life and social care, and knock-on effects for the NHS". It concluded: "Further local government funding reductions over the next five years are not an option".

The need for a fight back is clear. Young people, unprepared to accept a lifetime of misery, have already begun. When a handful of sixth formers in Bristol called an anti-austerity demonstration five thousand, mainly of their own age, turned up at a few days' notice. Youth Fight for Jobs in Leeds posted a budget day protest on Facebook and had over 3,000 signed up within hours. Youth Fight for Jobs has now called budget day protests in towns and cities across Britain on budget day - 27 May.

But while young people are showing the way the same cannot be said - as yet - of the majority of the trade union leaders, who have limited themselves to hand-wringing and pleading. Frances O'Grady, general secretary of the TUC, in her initial post-election statement suggested that the trade unions' role in this situation is to: "relentlessly argue the case for the public service ethos". As if this government could be convinced by argument!

Action needed

What is needed is action. On 20 June the Peoples' Assembly is holding a national demonstration against austerity in London. This will be the first national opportunity since the election to show opposition to austerity and has the potential to be very large.

However, trade unionists have to fight against any attempt by their leaders to suggest that lets them 'off the hook' in calling action. It must be a beginning not an end. It is positive that in Scotland the demonstration taking place on the same day is organised directly by the Scottish TUC.

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS, has correctly called for 20 June to be followed by a massive trade union demonstration in the autumn as part of a plan for co-ordinated strike action. In our view such a demonstration should be linked to a call for a 24 hour general strike against austerity and in defence of trade union rights.

There was nothing pre-ordained in the success of the last government in carrying out austerity. It was a weak government. Had the two million strong public sector strike in 2011 been used as a springboard for further action the Con-Dems could have been defeated. The trade union movement would also have grown enormously. The millions of currently non-unionised low paid, zero hour workers would have seen the trade unions as a force fighting in their interests, as would the unemployed, the disabled, and all others affected by austerity.

Instead, the majority of the union leaders settled for a few crumbs and told their members to wait for a Labour government. All trade unionists need to fight to make sure that doesn't happen again. The National Shop Stewards Network conference, taking place on 4 July (see advert below), will be a vital forum to discuss that battle.

Weak rule

Objectively, this government is even weaker than the last and can be defeated. Even the Osborne loyalist and Financial Times commentator, Janan Ganesh has tried to warn the Tories to govern "moderately". He said that if Cameron "tries to do Thatcher's unfinished business, he could saddle his party with a foul reputation by 2020". There is no doubt Cameron will achieve that, but we need to build a movement to make sure his austerity programme is defeated.

Even if, in the short term, the trade union leaders act as an obstacle to effective national trade union action against austerity, this will not prevent a fight back. However, it is likely then to be much more inchoate, perhaps with a myriad of different anti-austerity struggles - local strikes, campaigns against benefit cuts, anti-eviction movements, struggles to defend local services, a possible uprising of young people, and more. The Socialist Party will support all of those fighting against aspects of austerity, but will also campaign for them to be linked together in a mass movement against all of the government's attacks.

One important way to do this will be in elections. As the Labour leadership contest begins it is clear that there is no prospect of Ed Miliband's replacement being opposed to austerity. Next May there will be council elections taking place. There is a glaring need to elect councillors who are prepared to stand up and fight rather than watch their local community be destroyed by Tory cuts.

Clearly we must work towards building an electoral voice which is 100% against austerity and stands for a democratic socialist society, run in the interest of the millions not the billionaires.

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, involving the transport workers' union the RMT, the Socialist Party, and other trade unionists and socialists, is an important step in that direction. It was set-up in 2010 to enable trade unionists, community campaigners and socialists to stand candidates against the pro-austerity establishment parties. Its federal structure can allow all of the various campaigns against aspects of austerity to unite together under one umbrella to contest elections, without losing their own identity.

To make sure all the opportunities to build a movement against austerity are seized we need the strongest possible socialist organisation. If you agree join the Socialist Party today.

National Shop Stewards Network 2015 conference

This year's NSSN conference is open to everyone in the trade union and anti-cuts movements who are determined to organise the fightback against the Tories. Register today!

Saturday 4 July, 11am - 4.30pm

Conway Hall, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL

Confirmed speakers include PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka, BFAWU general secretary Ronnie Draper and anti-blacklisting campaigner Dave Smith

www.shopstewards.net

Labour leadership contest - appealing to big business

Sarah Sachs-Eldridge

The Labour leadership contest begs the question: what is the point of the Labour Party?

Paraded before us are a series of Blairite advocates of the austerity-lite and Tory imitation that failed to inspire support in the general election and led to the party losing 4 million voters since Tony Blair took office in 1997.

Ultra-Blairite Chuka Umunna has withdrawn from the race citing media pressure on his family. What does it say about the determination to fight the Tories of this former shadow business secretary? Compare that to the thousands of young people who have already taken to the streets to take on the Tory scum (see below).

Frontrunners in the race are former health secretary under Gordon Brown, Andy Burnham; Yvette Cooper, who was Brown's work and pensions minister. Other hopefuls are reported to include Liz Kendall and Mary Creagh (who?) and Tristram Hunt - 'Mr me too' on Tory education policies.

All five went to Oxbridge, four of the five are former 'spads' (special advisors to ministers), not one opposed the Iraq war, none supports rail renationalisation (backed by a majority of the public), none opposes austerity-lite or the benefits cap.

All agree that Labour needs to be seen as the party of big business. They offer no hope whatsoever to the millions now fearful of the Tory austerity onslaught that faces us.

Burnham spoke at Unite's conference last year and is the preferred candidate of the unions. The appointment of Rachel Reeves as his campaign coordinator says everything that is needed about where he stands.

Reeves, as shadow work and pensions minister, said Labour is "not the party of people on benefits. We don't want to be seen, and we're not, the party to represent those who are out of work." And Burnham's call to arms has consisted of a harking back to 1997 and the pro-privatisation, pro-war Blair government.

Unions gagged

The trade unions, the mass organisations of the working class, who created the Labour party so they would have an independent political voice, are locked out of the process. Under Ed Miliband, changes were made to end the bloc vote of the unions and destroy the last vestiges of a working class voice in the Labour party.

Now, trade union members can sign up as 'affiliated members' to vote in the leadership contest but not have a collective voice. Any members of the public - for £3 - can participate in what is more akin to a US-style primary than a chance for the working class to put its stamp on events.

At the FBU firefighters' union conference (report page 5) a motion to discuss reaffiliation to Labour was withdrawn.

This followed a third of the conference attending a fringe meeting where Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) speakers put the case for the building of a new party that could offer a programme to the 'aspiring' working class - ie one that is 100% anti-austerity, that called for nationalisation of the banks and for democratic socialism.

Len McCluskey, Unite general secretary, has said that he is not considering disaffiliation for the biggest union and funder of Labour. But 200 Unite members stood as TUSC candidates and many more participated in May's elections.

The Labour leadership election, due to end on 12 September, will convince many more members that they need a new political voice that stands unapologetically for the working class.

Fight Tories' new 'anti-extremism' law

Mark Best

The Tories plan to announce a raft of new 'anti-extremism' powers for the state in the Queen's Speech on 27 May alongside their proposed scrapping of the Human Rights Act.

Looking to pass measures floated before the general election, but opposed by the Lib Dems and even some Tories, home secretary Theresa May has set her sights on "extremists" who "do not break existing laws."

Restrictions on free speech, both in public and online, could be used against groups and individuals who "create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism".

For a party which has presided over five years of vicious cuts and is promising more to come, to claim they are fighting those causing "harassment, alarm or distress" is rank hypocrisy!

These plans come hand in hand with the so called 'Snoopers Charter' requiring internet and phone companies to keep detailed logs of usage for a year. At the same time changes are planned for the Freedom of Information act, to make it easier for officials to withhold information from the public.

They want to increase the scrutiny of the general public by those in power and hide what those at the top are up to!

These measures brought in under the guise of fighting terrorism are able to target any organisation or individual deemed to be engaging in "harmful activities" for the "purpose of overthrowing democracy".

Past anti-terror legislation, brought in under Labour as well as the Tories, has been used against protestors demonstrating against arms fairs and on environmental issues. The police have spied on anti-racist campaigners and socialists.

The Tories have made clear that they are gearing up for an assault on trade union rights, Margaret Thatcher famously called the striking miners "the enemy within" and a threat to liberty.

It's not hard to imagine that the capitalist class would argue that significant strike action would constitute a threat to public order, because it threatens what drives the capitalist class, their profits.

Similarly their definition of "extremist" could easily be extended to socialists and anyone who opposes the status quo.

The way to defeat these unjust laws or render them meaningless is to fight back and resist them. The non-payment campaign which defeated the Poll Tax in the early 1990s proves this.

Individual whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden have a role to play in bringing to light the abuses of those in power, but it is only through our collective strength that they can be stopped.

Attacks on the rights to strike and demonstrate must be met with organised opposition, including demonstrations and if necessary strike action.

State and big business spied on activists

The general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Matt Wrack reacted angrily to the news that police undercover agents had spied on him at anti-racist activities during the 1990s.

Blacklisted trade unionist Dave Smith made the claims at a fringe meeting at the recent FBU conference. In his recent book on blacklisting Smith says that Special Demonstration Squad agents had infiltrated trade unions and socialist organisations. Activist names were handed to the notorious Consulting Association which then passed this information on to employers. Socialist Party members were prominent targets of the SDS. Many workers on this blacklist were unable to find employment.

Blacklisting: The secret war between big business and trade union activists

Public meeting hosted by the Haldane Society of socialist lawyers and the Institute of Employment Rights

Tuesday 2 June 2015, 6.30pm

Diskus Room, Unite union office, 128 Theobalds Road, London WC1

Ukip provocateur unmasked

Ukip, the divisive right-wing party, admits that it sent an agent provocateur into Stand up to Ukip which was campaigning against Nigel Farage in South Thanet, Kent during the general election.

Anti-Farage campaigners say the spy worked for Secura Associates, the security company used by Farage, and encouraged Stand up to Ukip supporters to commit acts of vandalism.

Farage consistently complained about a group of "trade union-funded activists" being parachuted into South Thanet to sow "hatred and resentment" adding, ironically, "they're inciting vandalism and public disorder".

Them & Us

100,000

The number of jobs the government intends to axe from its departments over the next five years, seriously damaging public service delivery. 90,000 jobs were scrapped by the previous coalition government.

Haves and have nots

Data crunching by Lloyds bank has revealed that the richest 20% of the UK population is 105 times wealthier than the poorest fifth. It underscored the fact that those with wealth are rapidly accumulating more, with their property, pension pots and other personal assets growing by a staggering £1.5 trillion last year.

Meanwhile, the Equality Trust reckons that 66% of the population have 'no positive financial assets at all'!

Toxic businessman

Putting Dracula in charge of a blood bank is not recommended. However, the government is happy to appoint Tory MP Sajid Javid as its business secretary, notwithstanding being embroiled in a tax dodging scheme.

Javid was a senior executive at Deutsche Bank in 2003 when it set up a complex offshore tax dodging arrangement to pay its top dogs lucrative bonuses.

This didn't prevent him from becoming a Treasury minister in 2010 despite the government repeatedly pledging to crackdown on tax avoidance.

The new business secretary in his previous employment had also staunchly defended the dodgy investments which Deutsche Bank and others peddled, and which led to the global financial crash of 2008.

Bribing drug dealers

A government-appointed economist, Jim O'Neill, has called for the establishment of a multibillion dollar research fund to produce a new generation of much needed antibiotics.

Not taking action will cost countries trillions of dollars he says.

O'Neill wants to 'incentivise' big pharma (the giant pharmaceutical companies) for each new breakthrough by paying them billions, providing these new antibiotics are marketed as generic, not-for-profit, drugs.

Wouldn't it make sense to simply nationalise big pharma?

The drugs do work

One way to ease financial pressures on the NHS is to cut its enormously expensive drugs bill. Researchers have recently pointed out that £85 million a year could be saved switching from anti-blindness drug, Lucentis, to a cheaper and equally effective (but unlicensed) alternative, Avastin.

However, the drug company Genentech, owned by Roche, that makes and markets Avastin (which is currently licensed only for bowel cancer treatment), declined to seek a licence to use it in blindness treatments. Surprise, surprise, Lucentis, which is licensed but costs over six times more than Avastin, is also made by Genentech!

Support the National Rail walkout over pay and jobs

Bob Severn

Network Rail workers in the RMT and TSSA transport unions are set to take the first national train network strike in two decades for 24 hours from 5pm on Monday 25 May.

Union members will also refuse to do overtime on 25 and 26 May.

In the dispute over pay and job security, RMT members voted by 80% for strike action on a 60% turnout, a result that would even pass the Tories' proposed new anti-union strike balloting laws. TSSA members have voted by 53% for strike action on a 52% turnout.

A signal maintenance engineer in the RMT told the Socialist: "Twice now they've given us a 'final offer' - that was the end of their negotiations. So we had to get the 'yes' vote just to get Network Rail back to the table.

"The unconsolidated £500 for this year - which really is £300 in your bank account - doesn't increase your pension. For the following years it's only fixed to the RPI measure of inflation. It's a four year deal but only a two-year non-compulsory redundancy agreement.

"Network Rail has said we've had good deals over the years. Well we've fought for those deals - they weren't offered to us, they're not that benevolent!

"Why should we take a step backwards because everyone else is taking a hit? We feel that we should be leading the way, not accepting austerity."

Legal challenge

Network Rail has threatened a legal challenge to the TSSA ballot result at the same time as Acas negotiations.

In response, RMT general secretary Mick Cash said: "It is highly damaging that instead of focusing on the talks process Network Rail have opted instead to threaten a dash to the courts to challenge the democratic decision of rail worker members of one of our sister unions.

"RMT will not allow this legal manoeuvring to cloud the real issues in this dispute over jobs, safety and pay justice."

National Rail made £1.2 billion profits last year.

FBU debates how to combat Tory onslaught

Rob Williams

At the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) conference and various fringe meetings, delegates were trying to come to terms with the Tory majority government, further austerity and attacks on trade union rights.

The union's president opened conference by admitting he had just joined Labour. Yet the same conference unanimously passed a West Midlands motion instructing the FBU executive council to approach other unions to address the lack of political representation for trade unionists.

On the last night up to 70 delegates - about a third of conference - came to the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) fringe meeting 'What is the political direction of the FBU?'

Speakers included FBU general secretary Matt Wrack and TUSC chair Dave Nellist. Many in the audience took away TUSC join cards to sign up workmates.

The meeting discussed the disastrous Labour election campaign and the Blairite attempt to push the party rightwards. Here and in the conference, Matt criticised the Labour leadership while admitting the union had seen a Labour victory as the only way to get rid of the Tories.

It was clear from the meeting that many FBU activists are open about the idea of a political alternative. Even TUC general secretary Francis O'Grady said to conference, unprompted: "After the election some will inevitably raise that we need a new party of the left and that is fair enough" before opposing the idea!

Withdrawn motions

These debates were reopened in the final session of conference when discussing Labour Party re-affiliation. Two resolutions calling for this were both withdrawn. In the TUSC fringe meeting Matt asked those supporting the resolutions what their strategy to change things was, as he had never heard it!

Both resolutions suggested that because Labour had given some support on pensions, the time had come to re-affiliate. But Labour just offered a few compromises that stayed within the Tories' cost ceiling. Labour approved the primary legislation on public sector pensions that created the 2015 pensions scheme. Labour councillors on regional fire authorities have voted through Tory cuts.

A motion calling on the executive to push for coordinated industrial and political action in the TUC against further austerity and to defend trade union rights was carried.

Conference also discussed the fight against fire service cuts and especially the union's industrial action struggle against the attack on their pensions.

In an impassioned speech, Matt Wrack said: "We will not roll over and see our service decimated... We have to pick ourselves up, get thinking and get organising."

A motion from West Yorkshire delegate Dave Williams, seconded by West Midlands delegate and Socialist Party member Dave Pitt, to affiliate to the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) was passed. Nine unions now officially support the network.

National Shop Stewards Network 2015 conference

This year's NSSN conference is open to everyone in the trade union and anti-cuts movements who are determined to organise the fightback against the Tories. Register today!

Saturday 4 July, 11am - 4.30pm

Conway Hall, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL

Confirmed speakers include PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka, BFAWU general secretary Ronnie Draper and anti-blacklisting campaigner Dave Smith

www.shopstewards.net

Glasgow homelessness caseworkers

All-out pay strike forces Labour council back to table

Matt Dobson

The all-out indefinite strike for fair pay and grading by 70 Glasgow homelessness caseworkers, now in its eighth week, has brought the Labour council back to the negotiating table with a meeting planned on 20 May.

At the last meeting on 24 April management arrogantly dismissed the strikers' demands.

The homelessness caseworkers are underpaid by £5,000 a year for the level of work they carry out compared to other frontline staff in addiction services or older people's teams. But the council

made no commitment to resolve this, only offering an eight week review if the strikers went back to work.

Chris, a Unison steward from the North East team, spoke to the Socialist: "The council has been forced by the strike being effective, with the breaking down of every part of the homelessness service, to negotiate with the union.

"They need to offer something real, not like last time, for us to consider though. The support we are getting from other council staff is keeping us going."

There are now questions about the viability of management running the four main workplaces from which the caseworkers operate, with rumours that two offices may be closed in the coming week.

Already in the North East office, management has put up notices saying the office closes at 3:30pm due to industrial action. They denied this in the press, claiming the service is business as usual, despite pictures of the notices being taken by service users.

'Emergencies only'

Notices have also been put up at offices telling homeless people to go elsewhere unless they are an emergency case, despite this breaking the council's legal requirement to provide support.

Kim McLachlan of Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) Unison reported at a strike rally that bids for accommodation received by homeless workers at GHA had gone down by two thirds.

There aren't fewer homeless people in Glasgow, but fewer are being assessed due to the effectiveness of the council homeless caseworkers' action.

There is a log-jam of service users in temporary accommodation who can't be assessed for permanent housing.

On Thursday 14 May, 40 hospital porters from Dundee - also on all-out strike for regrading and fair pay - visited the homeless case workers.

At a meeting of over 100 strikers from both disputes Ian Leech, Glasgow City Unison social work convenor and Socialist Party Scotland member, said: "Less than 200 strikers in the two disputes have had a massive impact.

"Imagine if the trade union leaders coordinated national action, we could push back the pay freeze and austerity cuts."

ITV production staff

ITV production staff in the Bectu, NUJ and Unite unions took national strike action over pay on 14 May.

Pay has fallen 4% in recent years while ITV's profits soared 23% to £712 million. ITV offered a measly 1.25% pay rise, later upped to 2%. They previously said during the 2013-14 pay negotiations that 2.75% would be affordable in 2015.

Around 30 Unite and Bectu members picketed the Leeds ITV offices. At the picket line I met grips, prop assistants, camera operators and others angry about this insulting offer. Emmerdale, filmed at the Leeds studios, had its shooting cancelled for the day.

Several strikers were convinced they'll have to come out again to get the decent pay rise they deserve.

Iain Dalton

Workplace news in brief

Defend NHS pay

Nurses could strike if the Tories' talk of a "seven-day NHS" results in attacks on unsocial hour and weekend working payments, according to the leader of the Royal College of Nurses (RCN), Dr Peter Carter.

The RCN has never taken strike action before, so this warning indicates the anger that exists among nurses. NHS employers have already made proposals to cut out-of-hours payments before the election.

Other NHS unions, including Unite and Unison, took strike action over pay between October 2014 and January 2015, until action was called off, though little was won.

NHS workers will hope that all health unions put up a serious fight to defend unsocial hour rates that many need to get by on; especially following years of pay freezes or below-inflation wage increases.

National Gallery

National Gallery workers in the PCS union are continuing their campaign against privatisation with a ten-day strike starting on 26 May following the gallery's sacking of a union rep.

Campaigners occupied the gallery on 15 May after Candy Udwin was sacked after being accused of "breaching commercial confidentiality" - in reality for her role in opposing the planned gallery sell-off.

Workers at the gallery are also calling for it to pay at least the London living wage of £9.15 an hour to all employees.

The PCS is holding a national rally outside the London gallery at Trafalgar Square on 30 May from 1pm, with speakers including PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka and director Ken Loach.

Kone escalation

Kone lift engineer service workers from Gateshead, Chertsey, Keighley and Warrington have agreed to escalate their strike.

Strikers are angered by Kone's intention to cross reference workers' time sheets and use unreliable tracking devices as disciplinary tools.

At Gateshead's picket line we were told that the strikers' union, Unite, had forwarded an eight-point proposal to Kone management on 4 May with the intention of resolving the dispute. By the 18 May strike, Kone management had still not responded to Unite's proposals.

A Unite rep said: "After consulting our stewards and members the national negotiating committee agreed to escalate the industrial action to an all-out stoppage from 26 May until 9 June."

Elaine Brunskill

Barking drivers

Support is still strong for the Barking and Dagenham council drivers striking for another 22 days. Refuse, caretakers, grounds maintenance, graffiti removal drivers and other GMB unionised drivers are all out.

The London council claims it is simply reducing overtime by £1,000 per year, but on the picket line the drivers told the Socialist: "It's not overtime, it is a contractual payment. What right has the council to take it off us?"

"We've had no pay rise for several years, suffered a pay freeze, and now they just want to walk in and take £1,000 out of wages! How low can they go?"

Keith Williams, GMB senior organiser, said: "It's like Groundhog Day. We are just waiting for the council to bring in Acas and get back round the table." The council unsuccessfully attempted to illegally use agency workers to break the strike.

Pete Mason

US: Bernie Sanders calls for 'political revolution'

Presidential campaign needs to build independent political power

Philip Locker, Socialist Alternative (co-thinkers of the CWI in the US)

Boldly calling for a "political revolution" against the "billionaires and oligarchs" who have hijacked the political system, Bernie Sanders, the only self-described socialist in Congress, has launched an insurgent campaign for president.

Contradicting the cynics who say Americans are hopelessly apathetic and conservative, his announcement has been met with a tremendous wave of enthusiasm.

In the first day of his campaign 100,000 people signed up to get involved on his website and 35,000 people donated \$1.5 million, more than any other presidential contender raised in their first day. By the fourth day of his campaign, an incredible 75,000 people had donated \$3 million. Over 99% of contributions were for \$250 or less.

Big echo

This campaign can gain a big echo among the millions who are disgusted by corporate politics that is making the rich richer while living standards for the rest of us are increasingly lagging behind.

Sanders is calling for taxing the rich and big business, a trillion dollar public works programme to create 13 million jobs, a \$15 minimum wage, single-payer universal healthcare, opposition to pro-corporate free trade deals, strengthening union rights, and closing the gender pay gap.

His campaign stands in sharp contrast to the waffling and empty rhetoric of Hillary Clinton and other establishment politicians. He was one of the few members of Congress who voted against the Patriot Act in 2001 and calls for dismantling the NSA's domestic spying programmes.

He stands for bold action to address climate change, demanding a rapid transition away from fossil fuels towards energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Socialist Alternative welcomes Sanders' decision to run for President to help create, as he says, "an independent voice, fighting for working families" to "bring the fight to Wall Street and corporate America." His campaign will give Hillary Clinton a much deserved challenge and will widen the spectrum of political discussion, injecting some working class reality into the increasingly surreal and narrow parameters of official debate.

Demcrats

However, in our view, Sanders is making a fundamental mistake by running in the Democratic Party primary. Instead, we have argued that he should run as an independent to help build a political alternative to the corporate-owned political parties.

There is a glaring contradiction between Bernie's call for a political revolution against the billionaire class and attempting to carry that out within a party controlled by this same billionaire class.

This contradiction will be posed starkly when Sanders loses the Democratic primary. Sanders has said he will endorse the Democratic nominee - very likely to be Hillary Clinton, or if Clinton stumbles badly another safe pro-business Democrat.

This will mean that those mobilised by Sanders will be told to support a pro-corporate Democrat, the exact opposite of a revolution against the billionaires and oligarchs. This could result in the demoralisation of those mobilised and a historic lost opportunity.

When the Democratic machine blocks him, Sanders should continue running in the general election as an independent. Such a step would go against Sanders' stated intention and his general political approach. But it cannot be excluded, depending on how events unfold and how much pressure he is under from his own supporters.

Sanders' platform points in the right direction, but as socialists we would go further. For example Sanders calls for breaking up the huge Wall Street banks, a radical reform which we would support. But far better would be to bring the big banks under democratic public ownership.

Reformism

While Sanders limits himself to a programme of reforming capitalism along the lines of Western Europe, we stand for a fundamental socialist transformation of society. While the European workers' movements won huge reforms during the post-war period, capitalism was not overthrown.

Under intense pressure the European capitalist classes made big concessions in order to maintain their social and political power, but since the end of the post-war boom have carried out an unrelenting neoliberal offensive to roll back these reforms.

In relation to more immediate political issues, Sanders needs to speak out clearly in support of the Black Lives Matter movement against racist police brutality and mass incarceration.

Also, while Bernie honourably opposed both the Patriot Act and the invasion of Iraq, he has, on numerous occasions, voted for military appropriations. Regrettably, he did not oppose the war in Afghanistan and failed to oppose the recent Israeli massacre in Gaza.

Despite these political shortcomings, Bernie's campaign stands out as fundamentally different from all the other business-as-usual politicians running for President.

Mass movements key

To achieve the demands Sanders is campaigning on will require building powerful mass movements of working people. His campaign needs to be strategically orientated towards helping to strengthen movements from below.

Bernie made similar points when he argued: "a campaign has got to be much more than just getting votes and getting elected. It has got to be helping to educate people, organise people.

"If 80 to 90 percent of the people in this country vote, if they know what the issues are... Washington and Congress will look very, very different from the Congress currently dominated by big money and dealing only with the issues that big money wants them to deal with."

Sanders also pointed out that "We can elect the best person in the world to be president, but that person will get swallowed up unless there is an unprecedented level of activism at the grassroots level." The key will be to use the 2016 election to raise the level of organisation, confidence, and consciousness of workers and social movements.

The experience of Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant's election to Seattle City Council with 100,000 votes is an example of this. We organised a grassroots force that elected the first socialist in 100 years.

Once Kshama was elected, the momentum from her victory was used to build 15 Now, a grassroots organisation that mobilised hundreds of activists across the city and worked in coalition with trade unions to push through the highest minimum wage in the country at that time.

But experience has shown again and again that the Democratic Party is the graveyard of social movements. The Occupy movement was politically demobilised by elements tied to the Democrats with their appeals to support Obama in 2012.

The Black Lives Matter movement, the Fight for \$15, and Occupy Wall Street have greatly altered the political terrain on the issues of racism and economic inequality. By comparison, much of the left poured tremendous energy and resources into electing Barack Obama and the Democrats only to see them advance the agenda of Wall Street.

Critical role

Activists need to be realistic in recognising the Democratic Party establishment opposes Bernie Sanders and will make sure he does not win the Democratic primary. If necessary, they will use all the tools at their disposal, including their access to big money, the mass media, the authority of prominent politicians, and their control over the party structures.

Sanders' campaign could play a critical role of helping to lay the basis for a new political party. A broad left wing or working class party would be an organisation which brings together different struggles and generalises from them a common set of interests, a political programme.

Some on the left object that such an approach would end up weakening the Democratic candidate and help the Republicans to win the presidency. The fear of another Republican president is real and understandable. Socialist Alternative wholeheartedly agrees that the Republicans need to be opposed and we in no way want to see them elected.

Break the cycle

But the danger of an independent left-wing candidate tipping a close election to the Republicans is far outweighed by the more important need for working people to begin to build their own political voice.

Further, the big business Democratic politicians have proven themselves incapable of defeating the right-wing policies of an increasingly unhinged Republican Party.

Let us not forget that despite the 'hope' and 'change' of Obama's 2008 campaign, once in power Obama's pro-business policies prepared the ground for the Republican victories in 2010 and 2012 by demoralising progressives and allowing the Tea Party to demagogically tap into anger at the Democrats as the party in power.

We need to break out of the cycle of Democratic disappointment leading to Republican gains, and begin to build a working class political alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. If not now, when?

- See www.socialistworld.net for full version of this article

Election aftermath: anti-Tory austerity protests

Sheffield: Socialist Students mobilise for city protest

In Sheffield, on 16 May, over 600 people marched in protest against the Tories and their austerity policies. The demonstration, organised at short notice, followed a call for a response to the general election result by Socialist Students members.

Speakers from a variety of campaigns and trade unions addressed the rally, including Sam Morecroft from UCU lecturers union. Sam received a fantastic response from the crowd when he called for nationally coordinated strike action to "bury this government and bury its austerity policies".

Natalie Bennett, Green Party leader, called for electoral reform, but had little to say about how austerity could be resisted.

The demo showed that the Tories election victory has driven people not to despair but to anger.

Matthew Green, Hallam Socialist Students

Bristol: Huge response to demo call

Many were shocked to wake up on 8 May to the prospect of a Tory majority government. But the response of a group of Bristol sixth form students was to call an anti-austerity demonstration on Facebook. It struck a chord and support for the event on 13 May quickly snowballed.

As we moved through the city centre more people joined. In total around 5,000 marched on a week day evening.

The demo was overwhelmingly made up of young people from schools and colleges. This generation potentially has the most to lose from austerity (see back page) and yet most wouldn't have had any say on their future under this flawed democracy. Fighting for a future can't wait another five years.

Home-made placards showed that people weren't just against austerity. They wanted a fairer, more equal society, anathema to the 'greed is good' philosophy of the main parties.

At the end of the demo I spoke on behalf of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition on the need to keep the protests going and develop a movement to bring down the Tories.

This march was a great start but maintaining and building momentum will be crucial. Repeated demonstrations alone won't be able to do this. General strike action, including school student strikes, must be the next major step.

People may have woken up full of dread on 8 May but we can make sure it's David Cameron who wakes up fearing for his job every morning, from now until he's kicked out of Downing Street.

Tom Baldwin

Cheapskate council screws up election ballot!

Chas Berry

Medway TUSC's (Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition) outstanding performance in the local elections has been ignored by the Tory press, but they've wasted no time in focusing on a freak result in Rainham North where TUSC candidate Paul Dennis polled an impossible zero votes. The story has gone national and was even picked up by media outlets in Ireland and Australia

TUSC polled over 3,000 votes across the Medway Towns and in the Gillingham and Rainham parliamentary constituency the average was 229 per ward. Paul clearly voted for himself as did his family and a number of known TUSC supporters in the ward and would have expected to have polled around the average.

The real story not being heard is one about cost-cutting Medway council playing fast and loose with local democracy. Overworked staff didn't finish counting the results for the three parliamentary constituencies in the towns until 9:30am on 8 May. But returning Officer Neil Davies demanded staff return just five and a half hours later to resume counting for the local elections.

Paul's result wasn't declared until the early hours of Saturday morning and he was denied a recount despite what is an obvious error that raises serious questions about the rest of the count.

Paul is an RMT union health and safety rep who was inspired to stand for TUSC by our innovative local campaign. We owe it to him and to TUSC nationally to see that justice is done and that a thorough investigation is carried out by Medway council.

Send messages of support to northkenttusc@gmail.com and write to Medway's Returning Officer neil.davies@medway.gov.uk demanding to know where the ballots have gone.

Build up resources to fight the Tories

Naomi Byron, Socialist Party finance team

The Socialist Party election appeal has now raised £73,000, with a further £8,000 pledged. This reflects enormous enthusiasm for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) challenge, and pride in the Socialist Party's role in building TUSC.

Most has been spent on leaflets and other election material, but in areas where extra has been generated it is buying much-needed equipment. For example, Plymouth branch has been able to buy a second-hand copy printer - very useful for future campaigns.

Socialist Party members throughout England and Wales worked flat out for two months. The party was involved in producing 715,000 leaflets, posters and postcards. Over 350,000 items were sent out to local campaigns in the last few weeks.

TUSC was the sixth biggest party in Britain in terms of candidates standing. It won 118,125 votes across parliamentary and local elections. Standing so widely was a big stretch for all the forces within TUSC, but we responded brilliantly to the challenge.

Now with a Tory government planning vicious cuts and further anti-trade union legislation, we have the fight of our lives on our hands. If you support the Socialist Party's programme to fight the cuts and our strategy to build TUSC, join us now. Help us build and finance a socialist alternative.

Independent voice

All our resources come from our members and supporters. This ensures that the Socialist is an independent voice for the working class, and can put forward a genuine socialist alternative.

We urgently need to build up these resources, so are launching an appeal asking every member if they can increase their membership subs.

We are also asking supporters of the Socialist Party who don't yet want to join if they could make a regular 'supporters' payment. Visit www.socialistparty.org.uk/donate or call 020 8988 8777 to set up a standing order.

Our members raised over £10,000 for the fighting fund in April and May. But we need to raise another £15,000 by 30 June to ensure we hit our target (see chart right). Can you make a donation to fighting fund - or become an organiser, and help coordinate the fund-raising in your branch?

Sales of our newspaper also hit a high. Our election special 24-page edition sold more than any issue this year. Selling the Socialist - especially at solidarity price - is one of the best ways to raise money for the party and spread our ideas.

Thanks to all who have donated to the election appeal, lately including Nick Hart £150, Joe Durrell £30, Hannah Chaffey £6, Andrew Howe £5, Trevor Palmer £300, and Roger Priest £50. Roger previously stood for the Labour Party. But, enthused by the TUSC campaign, he is now a Socialist Party member.

If you'd like to increase your subs or make a donation, please call 020 8988 8777 or email info@socialistparty.org.uk.

Management thrashed in academies debate

Beth Sutcliffe, Lewisham Socialist Party

Students, staff and parents gave management a sound drubbing in a south London debate over whether three schools should be converted into academies.

Around 200 turned up for the 14 May event. David Sheppard, executive head of the Prendergast school federation in Lewisham, went head to head with the Socialist Party's Martin Powell-Davies, a member of the National Union of Teachers executive.

From the start the audience clearly felt disaffected by lack of communication about the planned change. An online questionnaire supposed to get "feedback from the school community" was judged overwhelmingly biased. One of the schools' former sociology teachers said her GCSE students could have written a better one!

'No change'?

Sheppard repeated many times that there would be no change to the ethos of the schools. Both Martin and audience members asked why convert if there would be 'no change'?

As teachers who currently work in academies pointed out, the reality of academisation is they are expected to work far longer hours - which has resulted in many leaving the profession. Again and again, staff, parents and students demanded a ballot take place to decide the schools' fate.

This was met with the reply: "This is a consultation, not a referendum." But pressure for a ballot remains strong, with further strikes planned in June.

Towards the end, Sheppard assured everyone that he and the governors would be attending more meetings in future - saying, "I always keep my word." The audience laughed. Clearly the community has little faith in him.

One attendee commented afterwards that "if that had been a boxing match, it would have been stopped in the second round."

Campaign news in brief

Bus canvass

One highlight of the TUSC Llanelli election campaign was an unexpected 'bus canvass'.

As I got on, somebody at the back who shops at the supermarket where I work recognised me. He said he had seen me in the local paper's election coverage.

I said, "yes I am a candidate, do you want a leaflet?" He enthusiastically accepted, and others started to ask me who I was and could they have one, so I dished out a few and had a chat with them.

Incidentally the driver, who was already known to us, came to our eve-of-poll rally after taking my leaflet. It was a welcome stop on our journey to making TUSC more than "the biggest party you've never heard of".

Scott Jones

Kent TUSC

Half our eight TUSC candidates in Whitstable and Folkestone were women. These included Bronwen Page and Louise Morgan, both young mums and new Socialist Party members.

Leading local trade unionists also rallied to the TUSC banner. This included a Unison convenor and president of the local trades council, the secretary of the local trades council, a Unite branch secretary, and the secretary and chair of Kent Unite Community.

Eric Segal

May Day rally

The Kent May Day workers' rally, whose organisers included local Socialist Party members, was a fantastic day of mainly women speakers from across the trade union movement.

Clog dancing, maypoles, poets and comedians all came together to celebrate trade unionism. There was a march around the village led by a jazz band. Centurion Sect, the best anti austerity band around, played an excellent, comical set.

Three local TUSC candidates were there to support. We sold 25 copies of the Socialist and raised £30 fighting fund.

Delia Hazrati

Film review: Russell Brand's 'The Emperor's New Clothes'

Helen Pattison reviews The Emperor's New Clothes, the latest film starring Russell Brand and directed by Michael Winterbottom.

"I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know". That is comedian Russell Brand's opening gambit in The Emperor's New Clothes. You might not know these examples, he says, but you know the story of tax evasion and huge bonuses in the financial sector.

You know the story of the wrecked economy, of bank bail outs and austerity, he says, huge national debt meaning the poorer must get poorer and public services be slashed.

Driving around Canary Wharf with a megaphone, Brand warns passers-by not to approach bankers, they are "crafty". Invading the headquarters of HSBC bank and others he wants to speak to CEOs and managers but is stuck trying to win round security guards.

We pay the price

Brand was right; you have heard it all before, maybe with less comedy but you know it. The gamblers, financiers and rich crashed the economy, but they haven't paid for it. We have paid for the crisis through huge austerity, privatisation and cuts to local services.

The cinema was less than half full for the opening night of the documentary, even though director Michael Winterbottom and Russell Brand were to take part in a live question and answer session streamed to over 200 cinemas.

Brand does some digging in the documentary. He climbs into press magnate Lord Rothermere's garden, complaining of his non-dom status and calling for him to pay tax. The difference between this documentary and others like it is the people who Brand actually gets to interview.

He tries to speak to bankers but when he can't he turns to the Care UK strikers, New Era estate residents and the Bakers Union. War on Want, tax evasion campaigners and Paul Mason, even Youth Fight for Jobs were interviewed for it. One of Brand's good friends is a firefighter and the attacks to them are outlined too.

Speaking to families in Grays in Essex, he looks into the community where he grew up and how it has been damaged by the recession. He meets the young mum who works an evening shift, finishing work at midnight, barely getting to see her kids. The teenager who can't afford to go to university.

He speaks to the inner London cleaner, working two jobs and who would take 300 years to earn what top managers and chief executives earn in a year.

Brand sees the real face of the attacks on disability benefits and how they are destroying people's lives. He uncovers food banks, who uses them and why they are needed.

Winterbottom votes Labour and that comes through, Clegg and Cameron take the biggest hits. Miliband and the Labour Party's role on topics such as fees is glossed over.

How to change things

It's angering to watch and be reminded of the vicious attacks on people's living standards. But Brand has no real answers. You won't leave the cinema knowing what to do next or how to change society.

The E15 mum campaign has resulted in 40 council homes being re-opened in Newham. TUSC and Socialist Party supporters in Coventry recently stopped a man being evicted from his home because of the bedroom tax.

We need to protest and we need a whole movement demanding an end to austerity, but we need working class and socialist political representation too if we seriously want to change the world.

Unfortunately, three days before the general election, Russell Brand mistakenly called for a vote for the Labour Party - although he later said he regretted this. It was a shame that Russell used his status among workers and young people in this way.

Save our 'life saver' libraries!

Protecting libraries is an important part of Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) campaigning. In Bristol, the independent mayor plans to close seven. Scandalously these cuts were fronted by the Green assistant mayor.

Saving libraries and other services requires principled, consistent opposition to the cuts - in actions, not just words. Local people will fight for this and we will stand with them.

Sean R spoke to the Socialist about how vital the library service has been to him.

"In September last year I found myself evicted and unemployed.

While I never had to sleep on the streets, not having a place of your own comes with its problems. Due to my low mood and feeling of helplessness, I started to drink - a lot. I thought there was no way out.

One day I called 999 to tell them 'a friend' was considering taking his life. Of course the friend was me. The ambulance crew came, but that is a different story.

After hitting rock bottom, I thought I had to do something - and fast. While I do have friends in Bristol, I am from Belfast so have no immediate family here. And my friends were not in a position to give me much more than the occasional night on the sofa.

Being homeless and without an internet-capable phone, I went to Bristol's local Bedminster library. In my first session there I found a homeless charity, St Mungos. I registered with them and was able to get a free meal once a day. They also helped me get on the council homeless register.

Light

So that was one meal a day sorted out, and at least a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

On the job front, I was able to use the library to search all of the main job sites, alter my CV and scan legal documents when required. The light at the end of the tunnel got a little brighter.

While all this seems logical and something you would expect, there is another, less tangible way the library helped me. It gave me something to do.

I was living in a squat with no amenities or facilities, literally sleeping on the floor in an empty room. But each day when I woke up, I knew I could go to either Bedminster library for one hour's internet or the central library for two hours.

Structure

And I was now attending interviews and going to St Mungo's. This gave me some structure and hope.

As of writing this today: I am in a job that I like, I viewed a property last night - again, found on the internet using the library - and it looks like I will be moving in.

I have learnt a lot in the past months. About taking responsibility for yourself, about the support there is out there for you - and how something people take for granted, a local library, can be a life saver.

I think the proposed cuts to libraries are a disgrace, and will put further pressure on people who rely on them. Not just for books and education - but for other services people tend to forget about."

Tories rig exams to favour rich students

Tom Price, Stroud school student

I have been out campaigning for TUSC, the 100% anti-austerity electoral alliance, at my school. I recently wrote a letter to Mr Neil Carmichael, Stroud's Conservative MP, about my concerns surrounding A-level reform - but was fed an unsatisfactory automated response. A supporter of TUSC inspired me to write to the Socialist.

A-levels have been 'modular' - split into units with an exam after each - since 2000. From September 2015 A-levels in some subjects are due to become 'linear', with one set of exams at the end of the course.

Former education secretary Michael Gove claimed this will allow "deep thought". I think this is illusory. Even if true, it will be outweighed by the human costs of the policy.

The Department for Education claimed AS-levels - threatened qualifications equivalent to half an A-level - were unreliable in predicting higher education success. This babble was contradicted by researchers from the London School of Economics, who said: "Scrapping AS-levels meant that one in five students would be deprived of showing their academic improvement during their first year in sixth form." This means many students capable of getting into 'top' universities would not be given the chance.

Merits

The current AS-level regime has its relative merits. It gives students freedom to specialise in their preferred subjects in Year 13. This promotes enjoyment of education, rather than being constricted to your choices at the beginning of Year 12 and having zero flexibility afterwards.

AS-levels provide universities with information to make correct choices for admission. If applying for universities more emphasis will be put on the personal statement, part of the application where students write about their life experiences.

The personal statement is a worse predictor for future performance. And think tank the Sutton Trust found that - unsurprisingly - personal statements give students from privileged backgrounds an advantage. This will deepen the problem of fair access to higher education in Britain.

AS-levels give students a huge confidence boost to aim higher. Taking this away will hurt the chances of students from non-traditional and poorer backgrounds who may not receive encouragement to aspire.

<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/20718>