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the Socialist

Formerly **Militant**

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Nick Chaffey

Southampton Socialist Party

Boris Johnson says austerity is over. But who believes this pathological liar?

As London mayor and Tory MP, Johnson promoted cuts to council services and supported tax cuts for the super-rich.

The Tory austerity axe has fallen hardest on council budgets. But shamefully, right-wing, Blairite councillors in Labour councils have carried out these Tory cuts, hammering both young and old.

Stripped away is the veneer of a civilised society; one in ten libraries have been closed, along with parks, playgrounds, youth clubs and children's centres.

It is working-class communities which have borne the brunt of these brutal council cuts. With the impact of job cuts, zero-hour contracts, rising rents and falling pay and benefits, there is little left of a safety net to cope. Scandalously, there are more foodbanks than McDonald's outlets in Tory Britain.

An extra 500,000 children have been thrown into poverty as a result of austerity cuts. Schools and children's services are being asked to cope while their budgets and staff are axed. Social care service cuts have left overstretched families struggling to cope with elderly parents and relatives. As the bar to

access services is lifted higher, the poorest are left starving to die of neglect.

Homelessness is a vivid sign of austerity - every town centre a shop window for abandoned rough sleepers. And thousands of job cuts have left council workers overworked and underpaid.

To add fuel to the fire we are all asked to pay more for less. Council tax bills are set to rise above the rate of inflation, and councils are introducing new charges and increasing others.

So as councils prepare to set budgets next month, everyone - Johnson, the Labour leadership candidates, trade union leaders, councillors of every shade will be asked, "what are you going to do to stop council cuts?"

Over the last decade, heroic struggles of council workers, working-class communities

and a handful of anti-cuts councillors have fought to protect jobs and public services. There have been important victories, but resistance has remained isolated.

We are campaigning for the council trade unions to ballot for national strike action to stop the cuts. And we call on Labour councillors to join the resistance by setting no-cuts budgets and demanding the return of the billions stolen by the Tories since 2010.

A mass campaign to mobilise working-class communities, drawing on the historic victory of the Militant, socialist-led Liverpool City Council in the 1980s (see page 3), must be central to the fightback against further Tory cuts and the rebuilding of our austerity-hit communities.

■ Time to take a stand - pages 10 and 11

the Socialist

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"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."
Karl Marx

James Ivens

Socialist Party member
participating in events in France,
15-19 January

After more than 45 days of strikes and 62 weeks of 'gilets jaunes' protests, French workers' appetite for struggle endures.

The unions counted 250,000 on the national day of action in Paris on 17 January. The demonstration was angry and very determined, but also with something of a festival atmosphere. Workers marched - often in uniform - behind union vans decked out with banners, flags, loudspeakers and mannequins.

Strikers compare Emmanuel Macron's confrontation over pensions to Maggie Thatcher's assault on Britain's miners. They see it as an attempt to break the unions and clear the way for unfettered capitalist thievery.

There is majority public support for the strike. It's fighting a generalised attack on all workers' pensions: slog longer, get less. But the transport workers have carried the burden of continuous stoppage almost alone.

Long strikes have also developed in schools and some other workplaces. And hundreds of thousands more have walked out on several national days of action. But the strike is not generalised yet.

Rhythm

The movement's rhythm is becoming intermittent as strikers regroup. But local actions and some small, unrelated strikes still erupt daily, as yet without coordination, like bubbles in boiling broth.

With no recent feeling of a decisive defeat or betrayal in a strike movement, morale remains high. And some are starting to question how to draw more workers into the struggle.

Gauche Révolutionnaire, the Socialist Party's sister party in France, sold dozens of its newspaper l'Égalité and discussed with many strikers. There is widespread openness to strategies for building a general strike to oust President Macron, and the need for a mass workers' party.

Indeed, strikers cheered when we proposed these ideas at the closing rally of a suburban Paris march on 18 January. However, union leaders have restricted their demands to preventing the pension 'reform'.

The 200 or so marchers on this local demo were appalled to hear of the extended pension age in Britain. They also applauded the idea of a similar strike in Britain to resist Johnson's new anti-union bill and continued austerity.

In one sense, Macron has already lost. His party, La République en Marche, is facing a drubbing in the March local elections.

So much so that he has changed the rules on how election results are announced to mask it. And the lead 'En Marche' candidate in the Noisy-le-Grand Paris suburb, for example, is running without his party's name!

However, there is a vacuum on the left. Workers pour onto strike demonstrations or gilets jaunes march-



photo
James
Ivens

EYEWITNESS REPORT: WORKERS' STRUGGLE IN FRANCE ON THE BOIL

es. But there is not yet a political coordinating body, a workers' party, to unite the movements and challenge Macron himself.

Those movements include the famous gilets jaunes. Having defeated Macron's petrol tax, their demands now include the abolition of all regressive taxes, such as VAT.

Their 'Act LXII' marched through Paris on 19 January. We joined around 15,000 protesters.

The march endured serious police provocation. Armoured 'CRS' riot cops encircled it, intimidating the gilets jaunes and imposing a painfully slow pace.

In the end, frustrated, the march broke away from the police, and the hated CRS attacked with tear gas and arrests. Police repression is once again becoming a burning issue in France, and not just for the gilets jaunes.

The presidential election is still

two years away. The strikers are catching their breath, but the reform is not law yet, and they have zero intention of stopping. "On ne lâche pas," they chant: "we're not letting go!"

A conclusive blow does not seem possible for either side for some time yet. But the advantage is with the workers. A democratic, fighting union strategy (see interview, p15) and steps towards a mass workers' party are the key.

TO WIN BACK WORKING-CLASS TRUST LABOUR MUST TAKE THE 'LIVERPOOL ROAD'



photo Dave Sinclair



WHAT WE THINK

The five Labour leadership candidates at the first regional hustings pursued a common theme - how can Labour win the trust of the working class.

Rebecca Long-Bailey said she was kept awake at night worrying about this, and how Labour could become "salespeople for socialism".

It's fitting that this search for a road to the working class took place in Liverpool, with its militant tradition. But it's a tragedy that no mention of the city's vital socialist lessons was made by the candidates.

The warning signs were there: in the 2019 council elections Labour's losses were overwhelmingly in working-class areas in the north west and north east. In 2018, Labour also lost councils in working-class areas in the midlands.

Why? Since 2010 almost 800 libraries have been closed; there's been a 73% cut in spending on youth services; social care is a social crisis; councils have cut over 800,000 jobs in that period; almost 200,000 council homes have been lost. The most savage cuts have been in Labour-held areas.

In 2010 the Con-Dem Chancellor George Osborne demanded that Labour councils do the Tories' dirty work and make the cuts at local level. In this way they would be complicit in ensuring that it was working-class people who should pay the price for the economic crisis caused by the bosses and billionaires - accepting the logic of capitalism. And they did. That is a major factor as to why Labour has lost the confidence of working-class people.

In the general election, Liverpool elected Labour MPs - most of whom are in the socialist campaign group. But it's not the case that Liverpool was always a Labour city - it was won. Despite a history of working-class struggle, from 1979-83 various coalitions of Tories and Liberals held power in the city.

But a socialist programme for working class struggle against the Tories turned that around. Under the leadership of the '47' socialist councillors, with the Socialist Party's predecessor Militant playing a key role, fighting to get back what Thatcher had stolen from the city defeated the Tories.

A conscious membership of a mass Labour Party was built through campaigns in the factories, workplaces and on the doorsteps - with general strikes, mass meetings and the confidence in a socialist alternative. The fact that all decisions of the council were made democratically, with those in opposition allowed to put their point of view, was an

important factor. But so too were the material gains of the working class from those socialist-led struggles.

Labour in Liverpool 'sold' socialism by making it a concrete question: 6,300 families rehoused; 4,800 houses and bungalows built; 7,400 houses and flats improved; six new nurseries; 17 community comprehensive schools established; £10 million spent on school improvements; five new sports centres built, one with a swimming pool attached; 2,000 additional jobs provided for in the council budget; 10,000 people per year employed on the council's capital programme; three new parks; rents frozen for five years.

An important step to winning back trust would be for Labour to take the Liverpool road. That requires fighting for what the Tories have stolen from the working class. Long-Bailey has written that "we can take charge and build a very different future for ourselves, but only if we grasp our most powerful collective weapon: a government for and by the people."

Even before the next general election local government offers Labour a chance to do this. Liverpool's socialist history shows how.

No-cuts council budgets and the building of mass united struggle for the money stolen from the working class are central to whether Labour can become a party of the working class and relevant to the fight against Johnson's attacks.



WHAT WE STAND FOR

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

As capitalism dominates the globe, the struggle for genuine socialism must be international. The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) which organises across the world.

Our demands include...

PUBLIC SERVICES

- No to ALL cuts in jobs, public services and benefits. Defend our pensions.
- No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.
- Fully fund all services and run them under accountable, democratic committees that include representatives of service workers and users.
- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees now and introduce a living grant. No to academies and 'free schools'!
- A socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs - free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out private contractors!
- Keep council housing publicly owned. For a massive building programme of publicly owned housing, on an environmentally sustainable basis, to provide good quality homes with low rents.

WORK AND INCOME

- Trade union struggle for an immediate increase in the minimum wage to £12 an hour without exemptions as a step towards a real living wage of at least £15 an hour. For an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings. Scrap zero hour contracts.
- All workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness and holiday rights from day one of employment.
- An immediate 50% increase in the state retirement pension, as a step towards a living pension.
- Scrap Universal Credit. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion.

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- Scrap the anti-trade union laws! For fighting trade unions, democratically controlled by their members. Full-time union officials to be regularly elected and receive no more than a worker's wage. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.

ENVIRONMENT

- Major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy and into ending the problems of early obsolescence and un-recycled waste.
- Public ownership of the energy generating industries. No to nuclear power. No to Trident.
- A democratically planned, low-fare, publicly owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.

RIGHTS

- Oppose discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice.
- Repeal all laws that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest! End police harassment.
- Defend abortion rights. For a woman's right to choose when and whether to have children.
- For the right to asylum. No to racist immigration laws.
- For the right to vote at 16.

MASS WORKERS' PARTY

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

SOCIALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

- No to imperialist wars and occupations.
- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working class control and management.
- Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.
- No to the bosses' neoliberal European Union and single market. For a socialist Europe and a socialist world!

Do you agree? Join the fightback!

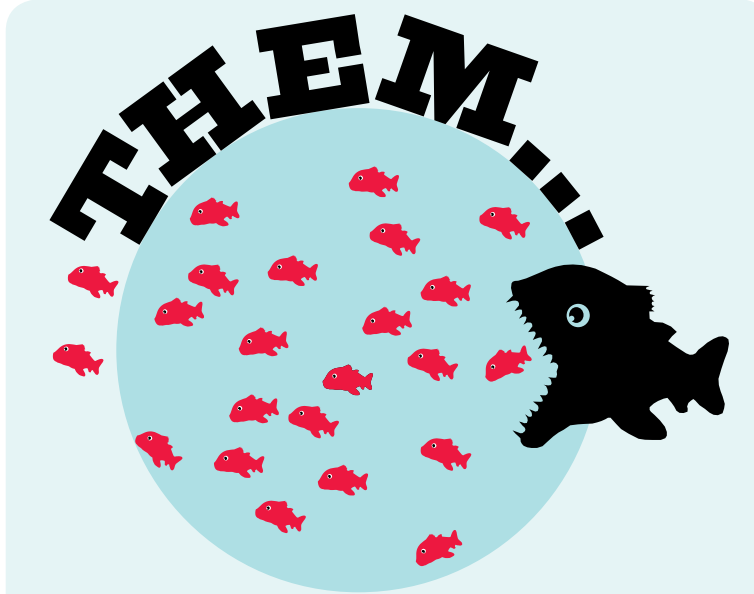
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8 years
Average difference in life expectancy between the rich and the poor in UK

Rich live longer
Wealthy people live eight years longer than the poor, UCL has found. The richest can expect an average 83 years for women and 81 for men. The poorest can expect just 75 years for women and 73 for men.

A tale of two cities
While hard-up French workers strike and march to save their pensions, the rich splash their cash in plush Parisian boutiques. The Financial Times' "How to Spend It" supplement laid out one marketing executive's "perfect weekend in Paris" on 21 January. Between pilates studios and hotel swimming pools, Myriam Badault shops for "copper cookware, exotic spices and vivid scented geraniums," then eats out before the opera or ballet. Meanwhile, many workers struggle for the time, let alone the money, for this breadth of participation in culture. Badault's luxury goods firm Dyptique is launching a new perfume this month. It's a steal at £120 for 70ml.

Bezos' billions reach space
The Earth's 2,153 billionaires had fortunes exceeding the wealth of the 4.6 billion poorest in 2019, says Oxfam. Super-exploitative Amazon boss Jeff Bezos remains at the head, with \$116 billion to his name. Bill Gates and Warren Buffett aren't far behind. If Bezos and Gates built a tower of all their filthy lucre - in \$100 bills - it would penetrate outer space. Meanwhile, a worker who'd saved \$10,000 a day since the pyramids were built in 2,500 BC would still only have one-fifth the average wealth of the five top billionaires.

£70,137
salary of a cabinet minister

Britain's billionaires
The six richest billionaires in the UK are worth as much as the poorest 13.2 million workers here. Just four families are swimming in wealth totalling £39.4 billion, says the Equality Trust.

6 people
in Britain are worth as much as the poorest 13.2 million workers

Sacked MPs enter Lords
Lost your seat in the general election? Worry not! You can simply mosey over to the House of Lords and reclaim your place in the government. The Tories have appointed Zac Goldsmith, defeated in December, and Nicky Morgan, who couldn't be bothered to stand, to parliament's upper chamber and Johnson's cabinet. They'll now earn £70,137 a year as ministers - and can claim up to £305 a day, plus expenses, if they're sacked.

4.6 billion
poorest make up the equivalent wealth of the 2,153 billionaires

Lords to keep it real
The government has floated the idea of moving the House of Lords to York or Birmingham. Tory party chair James Cleverly explains this would help peers "reconnect" with disenfranchised voters outside London. "Re"-connect? When has this semi-feudal, unelected chamber of 795 wealthy expense-spongers ever been 'connected' to ordinary workers? Abolish the Lords!

Martin Powell-Davies
Teacher and Socialist Party national committee member

The Guardian newspaper has revealed that the logos of over eighty different left-wing, environmental and animal rights groups - including that of the Socialist Party - have been included in a guidance document circulated by Counter Terrorism Policing. The inclusion of these logos, alongside those of fascist and white supremacist groups, understandably drew an angry reaction from campaigns such as Greenpeace, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Extinction Rebellion (XR). Socialist Party members are also angered by any implication that our determination to build a socialist society to end war, poverty and climate change should be considered 'extremist'. However, particularly after the revelations of undercover spying on our members and others by the Special Demonstration Squad, political policing directed against socialists and trade unionists comes, of course, as no surprise. Should this guidance document be taken as a serious threat or not? Counter Terrorism Policing tried to play down the issue, claiming that the guidance was simply to help people distinguish between 'legitimate protest groups' and "extremists." But definitions of 'legitimate' and 'extreme' can change - especially under this Conservative government. For example, when it was revealed that XR had been specifically listed as an 'extremist' organisation in their separate guidance, South-East Counter Terrorism Policing apologised for making an "error of judgement." However, Priti Patel,



Police issue counter-terror guidance against campaigners
PROTESTING IS NOT TERRORISM



Capitalism fails NHS services in Liverpool: scrap PFI!

Roger Bannister
Liverpool Socialist Party

The collapse of outsourcing company Carillion in May 2018 was described as "a story of recklessness, hubris and greed" by a parliamentary enquiry. While this is undoubtedly correct, in Liverpool in practical terms it meant a halt to the building of the new Royal Liverpool University Hospital. This is a much needed facility for residents of the city and its surrounding boroughs. The National Audit Office has just published a report which gets close to the true cost of this fiasco, initially funded under the discredited 'private finance initiative' (PFI) scheme, which enabled private-sector construction companies to rip off millions of pounds from public-sector contracts. This scheme was abandoned once Carillion went under. The hospital should have been open and treating patients with state-of-the-art equipment by now, but the earliest current estimate of its opening is 2022. As if this delay is not bad enough, the cost of building the new facility has rocketed from £350 million to at least £720 million. This was following the discovery

of major defects in work originally undertaken by Carillion. Concrete beams were found to have cracks in them, necessitating their replacement with conventional steel girders under a new contractor, Lang O'Rourke. **Disastrous** But the disastrous state of affairs does not end there. Following the Grenfell disaster, it was further discovered that the cladding on the external walls of the building was unsafe, posing major risks to life and limb in the event of a fire! Brand new equipment has had to be taken out after it was discovered that three floors were liable to collapse. The existing hospital building has frequent power failures, and floods on a regular basis. But it actually has more beds than the 646 planned for the new building, raising doubts about its long-term capacity. In political terms, the tragedy of

the new home secretary, while accepting that XR was a "protest organisation" rather than a terrorist group, made clear that the government was "constantly looking at individuals and groups", and that "everything has to be based in terms of risk to the public." **Prevent** These documents were produced as part of the 'Prevent' strategy, supposedly designed to 'prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'. However, it is the wrong strategy to meet that objective. It dissuades teachers and young people from openly discussing issues, and risks increasing the alienation that leads some people into the dead-end of individual terrorism. The documents could mark a worrying step towards widening Prevent's scope to include a very different objective - to clamp down on anti-government protest. The legislation already refers to "not just violent extremism but also non-violent extremism." It doesn't take too much imagination to see this being directed at climate change protestors or trade unionists organising strikes and mass demonstrations. If left unchallenged, both school students and their teachers may start to be questioned and pressurised about their support for socialist parties and campaigns. Left-wing trade unionists might even face being barred from their posts in schools and other public services. Trade unions should be demanding that the government withdraws these documents and the Prevent strategy, and make clear that they will act to defend members organising against the extreme and damaging effects of capitalism on millions of people and our planet.

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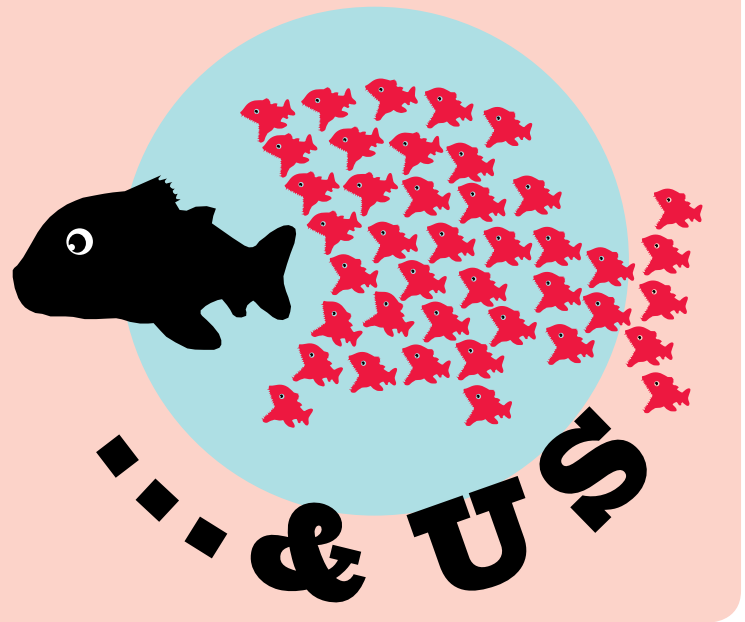
Half
of England's private renters suffer stress or anxiety due to housing

A&E waiting time solved!
A&E waiting times are at an all-time high, as anyone who's been ill or injured recently will know. The government target since 2004 has been for 95% to be treated and moved on within four hours, already quite a wait. But in December, just 68.6% were processed in that time - a new record low. The Tories' solution? Easy: scrap the target!

Grenfell advisor insult
Boris Johnson appointed engineer Benita Mehra to advise the judge leading the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower disaster last month. The organisation Mehra used to head had previously received £71,000 in funding from Arconic, maker of the cladding panels which spread the fatal inferno. The whole capitalist establishment is implicated in the Grenfell deaths. And the bosses are marking their own homework once again. For an independent, resident and union-led inquiry!

Private rent causes illness
High rents, insecure tenure and inhumane conditions are making England's 8.5 million private renters sick. Half suffer stress or anxiety, 2.7 million feel hopeless, and two million suffer physical illness, reports Shelter. The number of families renting privately has more than doubled to 1.6 million - a quarter of families - in a decade. Renters spend an average of 41% of their income on housing, say government statistics. Rents are projected to rise still more - over 3% annually over the next five years. Meanwhile, the value of landlords' investments has more than doubled in a decade to £1.6 trillion, according to Savills.

£829,255
Boris Johnson's income in 2018-19



Greggs bonuses stolen
Greggs announced a £300 profits bonus for 25,000 staff this month. But low-paid bakery workers might only get to keep £75 of it as the state will deduct the rest from their Universal Credit! Universal Credit must be scrapped in favour of real living benefits. But why does 'generous' Greggs get away with paying so little that workers have to claim in the first place?

Double
Growth in value for landlords' investments in a decade, to £1.6 trillion

No trust in UK institutions
The UK came second-to-last in the latest survey of popular trust in its national institutions. The annual Edelman Trust monitor measures public confidence in the government, businesses, media and NGOs in 28 countries. Six in ten believe politicians undermine national institutions and democracy for their own gain, and worsen the state of the country. Only in Russia were the institutions of capitalism less trusted.

Big Ben bunkum
Chief cutter Boris Johnson is asking the general public to fund a £500,000 temporary opening of Big Ben. He wants to pause renovations and ring the bell on 31 January when the UK formally leaves the EU. Given Johnson's Telegraph column bagged him £275,000 a year, he earned a total of £829,255 in 2018-19, and he's still on £150,402 a year plus expenses, perhaps he could cover it himself? Workers have given more than enough to the Tories and their big business masters already.

Fight continues after win against academisation in east London



Ian Pattison
East London Socialist Party

We've won. But the fight is far from over.

St Angela's school in Newham, east London, won't become a privately run academy. Privatisation has been ruled out for five years.

On the eve their second round of strike action, National Education Union (NEU) members won the reprieve. They were ready with more strike action if academisation continued.

St Angela's is a Catholic school. The diocese wants all 14 of its schools to join a multi-academy trust.

The NEU is campaigning with parents across east London to stop this happening. St Angela's balloted for strike action as soon as they caught wind of the academisation threat.

NEU members at St Michael's

school in Newham will be out 21-23 January. Their strike days will hit six if management don't back down. And St Bon's is balloting for action too.

Along with supporters, the striking teachers at St Michael's discussed the importance of continuing to win over parents' support. Niall Mulholland, local Socialist Party member, recounted how he and other parents organised support for striking teachers at Stratford Academy, in 2012, successfully forcing back senior management's planned attacks.

Louise Cuffaro, joint NEU Newham secretary and Socialist Party member, said overcoming "divide and rule" tactics were crucial.

Supporters of the teachers planned to leaflet outside a parents' meeting organised by senior management at St Michael's about the dispute to counter management misinformation.

Ealing tax office strike



Ealing tax office staff out on strike on 15 January. The campaign continues to save a local office against government cuts. Socialist Party member Rob Williams speaking from the National Shop Stewards Network brought solidarity. He raised about the other trade unionists who could be in the firing line of the Tory government, such as transport workers, and the fightback needed to defeat all these attacks
photo London Socialist Party

Renewing the left in PCS

Dave Sample
PCS national executive committee member (personal capacity)

On 18 January, reps from across many different sections of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union met in Manchester. We discussed the growing crisis of leadership in the union, and formalised the existence of a loose alliance of socialist PCS reps into the Broad Left Network.

Reps at the meeting agreed an outline programme and candidates for the upcoming PCS national elections. This includes agreeing to support existing national executive committee and Socialist Party member Marion Lloyd for PCS national president.

PCS members, made up of civil servants and private sector workers on government contracts, have borne a huge cost due to Tory austerity. Pay has been held back by up to 20% since 2010. More than a hundred thousand jobs have been lost.

Boris Johnson's re-elected Tory government, despite its pledges to end austerity, has continued efforts to undermine the civil service compensation scheme, which governs the redundancy rights of civil servants.

Our existing union leadership, largely drawn from PCS Left Unity, has proven utterly incapable of leading a national dispute with the government. Two national ballots have failed to reach the 50% participation threshold imposed by the 2016 anti-union laws.

Socialist Party members across all of the unions have fought to organise a united trade union campaign to oppose the undemocratic Tory anti-union laws. The ultimate blame for

PCS' failure to be able to take strike action lies with the government, and its use of the powers of the state to restrict workers' rights while giving employers ever more rights.

Left Unity deserves plenty of blame as well. They insisted that ballots for industrial action only involve pay and denounced anyone who disagreed as a saboteur intent upon wrecking the union's national campaign. Yet they have now ditched their previous views and have agreed to include pensions and compensation scheme in the campaign.

All of this has been accompanied by an increasing centralisation of power within the union, led by general secretary Mark Serwotka and unchallenged by national president, Fran Heathcote of Left Unity. Major changes to how the union seeks to organise members have been accompanied by a shift in power from the elected lay reps of the union to the unelected full-time officers.

Key decisions

Broad Left Network supporters meeting in Manchester recounted examples of obstruction on regional and devolved-nation committees, arbitrary decisions taken to reduce support to smaller groups, and a lack of lay-rep involvement in key decisions about where to deploy the union's resources or oversight of how effective they are. Full time officer-led organising is increasingly discredited.

Union democracy, pay, pensions, office closures, attacks on facility time, defeating redundancies, work in the private sector, social security, mental health at work, transgender rights, women's representation and many other issues were highlighted by reps as ways in which the existing

leadership is failing, and feature as part of the programme on which Broad Left candidates will stand.

The leadership of the union in particular stands condemned for its failure to build the campaign of industrial action that emerged in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Stockport Universal Credit, allowing members to remain isolated.

Moving the draft programme, PCS national executive committee member Alan Dennis, who was an inaugural secretary of PCS Left Unity, decried "the narrow and controlling nature of discussions in Left Unity", where dissent is dealt with by "bullying or ridicule".

He welcomed the move to formalise the Broad Left Network as a chance to rebuild an open, democratic, socialist organisation inside PCS that will support serious debate on how we defend the interests of union members. Alan was elected inaugural national secretary of Broad Left Network.

Marion Lloyd, Broad Left Network candidate for National President of PCS, welcomed the meeting in Manchester, which she chaired: "PCS Broad Left Network is not just an electoral organisation, formed for the national elections; its goal will be to raise the confidence and consciousness of our union's reps, and to make the idea of a 'member-led union' more than a tired phrase of the current leadership."

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ROYAL MAIL WORKERS TO REBALLOT FOR STRIKE ACTION: "WE ARE IN THE FIGHT OF OUR LIVES"



Gary Clark
Secretary CWU Scotland
no 2 branch

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has announced that talks with Royal Mail management have broken down and the union will be rebalancing our membership for industrial action.

The union overwhelmingly smashed the undemocratic voting thresholds in the Tory anti-union laws in their national strike ballot last October - a 97% vote for action on a 76% turnout.

Scandalously, however, one unelected High Court judge dismissed the ballot and the action planned for during the general election and Christmas - the busiest time of the year for the company.

Just prior to Christmas, Royal Mail requested a period of calm for negotiations during which the CWU would not reballoon the membership, to allow a basis for real negotiations.

CWU deputy general secretary Terry Pullinger met with Royal Mail's senior management to agree the process for negotiations to resolve the dispute.

At this meeting, Royal Mail stressed that the financial position was poorer than expected and they were under pressure to make changes much more quickly to turn around the company. But this comes on the back of a lucrative general election for Royal Mail, and a busy Christmas.

The CWU's postal executive committee met on 14 January and confirmed that it would ballot our members if Royal Mail didn't pull back from their plans.

To be clear management are out to destroy the power of the CWU and must feel strengthened by the election of the Tory government. And we are clearly in for the fight of our lives.

We must now get another massive Yes vote and get our members up for the battle ahead. Members should take confidence from local management in Bootle being forced back from disciplining a local rep by the threat of action.

Nationalise Royal Mail

We also should be calling for the company's books to be opened up to the workers and for Royal Mail to be nationalised with the capitalist spivs replaced by the workers to properly and democratically run this great public service.

This is a battle for the whole labour and trade union movement to engage in, especially as Boris Johnson looks to roll out more anti-union laws, targeting the rail and transport unions. The CWU needs to particularly join with the RMT and the other transport unions in the firing line, demanding action from the Trade Union Congress to stand up to the Tories.

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Westex strikers read the Socialist

Members of Unite the Union at the Westex Carpets factory in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire, have been on strike for two months in their ongoing dispute over pay.

On their latest picket line, strikers bought copies of the Socialist newspaper (right) and agreed with our front page headline: "Bosses rip us off!"

The strike began on 20 November after workers rejected a minimal pay rise which was then withdrawn by the company. It has since refused further dialogue.

Trade unionists should keep donations coming into the strike fund:

- Account name: TGWU
- Account number: 20175407
- Sort code: 60/83/01
- Reference: Westex Strike Fund

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Belfast Hovis workers' all-out strike

Hovis workers in the Bakers and Unite trade unions have voted for an all-out strike in Belfast, Northern Ireland for better pay.

Picket lines will start at one minute past midnight on 24 January after an 88% majority voted for strike action to win their 5.1% pay claim.

Unite says that after deducting shift premiums, overtime and bonuses, Hovis workers receive a basic wage 90p below the national minimum wage threshold.

Unite officer Sean McKeever says: "Unfortunately management has completely failed to address legitimate pay expectations in recent pay talks. Bosses refused to meet the pay claim and instead offered a meagre 23p an hour uplift (3.2%). In effect, bosses are forcing workers to the gate for less than 14p an hour in terms of a differential. This is both scandalous and an insult to the workforce. "Workers are determined to secure themselves fair pay."

The start of 2020 saw the assassination of the top Iranian general Qasem Suleimani by US forces, recklessly destabilising the Middle East region. In the first of a series of articles about turmoil in the Middle East, and in particular the consequences of interventions by international and regional powers, **Niall Mulholland** from the Committee for a Workers’ International looks at events in Iraq

In the immediate aftermath of Suleimani’s assassination, millions poured onto the streets of Iraq and Iran to mourn him as an Iranian hero and Shia martyr. This was despite his recent role in the bloody repression of mass protests in both countries, which reignited in Iraq in recent days.

The assassination triggered a series of events that led to the accidental shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner by the Iranian military, with the terrible loss of hundreds of lives, which, in turn, provoked new protests against the Iranian regime.

This is not the first time Western powers have intervened in the region with grave results. Imperialism, particularly the US, British and French capitalist powers, has a long and bloody record of meddling in the Middle East. And the backdrop to the current crisis can be found in the catastrophic invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

The then US president, George W. Bush, and British prime minister, Tony Blair, ordered their armed forces to bomb Iraq’s cities and tanks, troops and armoured vehicles were sent in from Kuwait. This act showed how the imperialist powers ignore so-called ‘international laws’ when it suits them.

Anti-war protests

Millions of anti-war protesters marched across Britain, the United States and around the globe in opposition to the plans of Bush and Blair. But it would have required greater action, such as strikes and general strikes which directly threatened the interests of the invading powers, to stop the war drive. The invasion set in train disastrous events that shaped regional and world politics for years to come.

The 11 September 2001 terror attack on US soil by Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network, killing thousands of innocent people in New York and Washington, was seized upon by the US ruling elite to enhance its long-held geo-strategic aims in the Middle East and Central Asia. Afghanistan was invaded and the Taliban overthrown, despite most of the 9/11 plane hijackers originating from Saudi Arabia, a close US ally.

The next aim of the US, the invasion of Iraq, was prepared for by the imperialist powers with a litany of lies. They falsely claimed that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had ‘weapons of mass destruction’. Yet Saddam Hussein’s primitive nuclear program was closed down under US and UN supervision after his defeat

in the 1991 Gulf War.

The claim that he was in alliance with Al Qaeda was also nonsense. Al Qaeda’s Sunni fundamentalists and Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist secular nationalist regime, held each other in mutual contempt and hatred.

As The Socialist said at the time of the 2003 invasion, the real motivation for the war was to seize control of the vast oil resources of Iraq and to use occupied Iraq as a key strategic position in the Middle East region for US imperialism.

The enormous strength of the US army in comparison to the Iraqi army, as well as its soldiers’ low morale, meant the war was over within weeks. Saddam Hussein was captured in December 2003 and executed after a show trial three years later. George Bush arrogantly declared “mission accomplished” and promised peace and prosperity for Iraq now the tyrant Saddam was gone.

This bombast conveniently ignored the fact that Saddam was previously a close US ally. He came to power in Iraq in the 1970s after internal struggles within the ruling Ba’ath party.

The Ba’athists mixed Arab nationalist and socialist rhetoric but following their successful coup in the 1960s struck out at the left, violently suppressing the once-powerful Iraqi Communist Party. Attempts by its leadership to find accommodation with the regime were rewarded in 1978 by Saddam Hussein’s renewed repression, including the execution of many Communist Party members.

Saddam Hussein

During the Cold War years, Western powers sponsored Saddam Hussein’s eight-year war against Iran, which cost at least one and a half million lives, following the coming to power of the Mullahs in 1979/80.

However, Saddam overplayed his hand and invaded neighbouring Kuwait on 2 August 1990, which gave him more vast oil resources. This directly collided with US imperialist interests in the region. Washington assembled a ‘coalition of the willing’ and waged the first Gulf War - possible only with the redrawing of the world balance of forces after the collapse of Stalinism in the former USSR - driving Iraq forces out of Kuwait.

Saddam was allowed to stay in power, and gas thousands of Kurds in revolt, as the Western powers watched on, but he remained a major irritant for Washington. Cruel UN sanctions imposed on Iraq led to the deaths of many thousands of civilians mainly due to the lack of medicines. In 2003, US imperialism finally got its chance to remove Saddam Hussein but at further catastrophic cost to the people of Iraq and the region.

According to Iraq Body Count in 2017, the conflicts in Iraq resulted in the death of 199,734 Iraqi civilian and 4,424 American soldiers, as well as the injury of 31,952, according to the US Department of Defense. Some other estimates put the total figures, as a consequence of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq war and taking into account wider categories of mortality causes, at over two million.

In the first three years of the war and occupation, over four million Iraqis were displaced from their homes. The use of depleted uranium in shells by US forces caused an increased rate

of cancer and birth defects. The years of US occupation led to the destruction of Iraqi infrastructure and public services, like health. Open street sewers and undrinkable water inevitably spread deadly diseases.

While, as of 2013, the Iraq war had cost US taxpayers about \$2 trillion, none of the stated objectives of the US-led invasion and occupation were achieved. The conscious fomenting of sectarian strife, as US forces leaned on one section of the population against another, led to sectarian bloodbaths.

Tragically, no mass force of the working class, uniting all religious

and national groups on an anti-imperialist, socialist programme, existed. This could have successfully expelled the occupation and opposed the local reactionary politicians.

Occupation

The occupiers’ ‘de-Baathification’ led to a purge of Saddam’s Sunni-dominated state and military apparatus. Sunni militias rose in revolt against US, British and other forces, and also indiscriminately targeted Shias. Atrocities were followed by counter atrocities by Shia militias.

As Western forces became bogged

down in an endless conflict, the occupation became synonymous with the worst of the colonial-era rule. Detention centres, such as the Abu Ghraib, were notorious for the torture and humiliation of Iraqis by US forces. Iraqi homes were raided and ransacked, family members kidnapped. The medieval-like sieges of Fallujah city in 2004 were high-profile examples of ‘collective punishment’ of tens of thousands of Iraqis by western forces.

It was during these years that Iran, the US’s main opponent in the region, became strengthened. The crucial role played by pro-Shia political and

militia forces in Iraq make up an important part of the ‘Shia Arc’ in the region, strengthening Tehran’s reach and influence, all the way to Lebanon.

According to the journalist Patrick Cockburn, “After the US invasion in 2003, the Americans often dealt with Suleimani, knowingly but at a distance. Both Washington and Tehran had to agree on all Iraqi presidents and prime ministers before they could be appointed...both sides had an interest in maintaining a stable Shia-dominated government, even if they vied to bring it under their influence” (London Review of Books, 23



photo Mstyslav Chernov/CC

IRAQ - A BRUTAL LEGACY OF IMPERIALIST INTERVENTION

January 2020).

Under occupation, Iraq held multi-party elections in 2005. Nouri al-Maliki became prime minister in 2006, and remained in office until 2014. His government implemented policies that alienated the Sunni minority, worsening the sectarian tensions already fostered by the US.

The region’s rulers and imperialism were badly shaken by the ‘Arab Spring’ which erupted in 2011/2012, toppling despots in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere. Iraq was not immune. Mass protests occurred against poverty, lack of basic infrastructure, corruption, occupation and the rule of right-wing sectarian-based parties.

But emerging from decades of oppressive rule, the various protest movements were not able to develop class-based, socialist mass parties that could unite the working class and oppressed across all religious and ethnic divisions. The ruling elites were able to regroup and, in many cases, use sectarian poison to divide and rule. This found its most disastrous expression in Syria, where the revolutionary uprising against President Assad was derailed by the civil war and outside powers’ interference.

Isis

In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as Isis), fuelled by the plight of the discriminated-against Sunni minority in Iraq, launched a military offensive in northern Iraq, dramatically capturing Mosul city.

Both the US and Iran had a common interest in stopping Isis fighters taking Baghdad.

US combat troops were officially and ignominiously finally withdrawn from Iraq by December 2011, after years of bloody conflict in which it was clear that imperialist forces could not quell resistance to their occupation. The anti-war protests in the United States, Britain and around the world, also played an important role in forcing the withdrawal. However, the US and its allies unleashed another military action, Operation Inherent Resolve, in 2014, as the Isis threat grew.

General Suleimani played a key role in directing pro-Iranian militias in Iraq in the conflict with Isis. Their victories brought Suleimani hero status among many of Iraq’s Shia population. But his role in the violent repression of small-scale protests in Iraq, last October, and the deaths of around 500 protesters at the hands of Iranian proxies, like Hashd al-Shabi, the umbrella grouping of Iraq’s mostly Shia militias, provoked a near mass uprising of the Shia community.

The Iraqi ruling elite hope Suleimani’s assassination can undermine the protests. It claims it is defending Iraqi sovereignty and that the greatest threat comes from the US. The Iraqi parliament voted, albeit indicatively, for the removal of all American troops from Iraqi soil. Most Kurdish and Shia parliamentarians did not attend the vote, an indication of the sectarian and national fault lines that exist within Iraq.

Yet new anti-regime demonstrations took place on 19 January and are continuing, with protesters closing roads in cities across Iraq, and demanding political change. “They have had their chance, they have had

many chances - 17 years of chances. There will be no extension”, a 19-year-old protester said.

Shia leader and militia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, announced his support for escalations of the protests and called on his followers to take to the streets in “a million-man march”. While demanding the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq, he also opposes Iranian domination. However, despite al-Sadr’s nationalist appeal, many protesters are very sceptical of his motives, believing he will attempt to hijack and divert the protest movement.

This reinforces the need for mass protests to be cross-community and linked up on a local, regional and national level, through democratic committees of action that include self-defence against militia attacks.

Protest movement

The protest movement of recent months has proven to be resilient in the face of bloody repression. To develop it needs to go beyond immediate slogans and to discuss a programme of radical social and economic demands, and to pose the question of who should rule Iraq. The repressive and sectarian regimes imposed by the Western imperialist occupation are widely discredited and without authority amongst millions of workers.

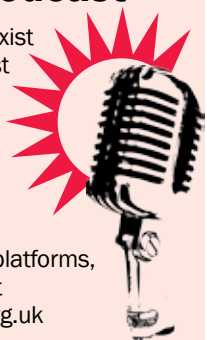
A revolutionary constituent assembly, with a majority of workers’ representatives, from all religious and ethnic backgrounds, can act to end poverty, mass unemployment, and broken infrastructure and public services. The nationalisation of the country’s huge oil wealth under democratic workers’ control and management, to be used for the benefit of the majority of Iraqis, is a crucial starting point.

The Iraqi people have endured barely imaginable horrors over the last decades, from iron dictatorship to brutal imperialist occupation, to dysfunctional and corrupt rule by local sectarian and ethnic-based right-wing parties. Increasing numbers of the working class and poor will see the need to build independent trade unions and a mass party that represents their class interests.

With radical socialist policies, such a workers’ party could rekindle Iraq’s powerful left traditions and form a workers’ and poor people’s government that could kick out imperialism, sweep away the sectarian forces, bringing about lasting peace and prosperity and providing a beacon for workers and the poor throughout the region.

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TIME TO MAKE A STAND

■ Defend jobs, services and communities

■ Set legal no-cuts budgets

■ Carmarthenshire County Unison oppose Plaid Cymru cuts

Below we print extracts from the response by Carmarthenshire County Unison to the council's 'consultation' on the 2020-2023 budget.

We view the setting of a new budget for 2020-2023 as yet another opportunity for Plaid Cymru-led Carmarthenshire County Council to stand up and defend services, jobs and our communities from Tory cuts passed on by the Labour Welsh Assembly government.

We make no excuses for again calling on Carmarthenshire County Council to set a legal no-cuts budget. We have consistently argued for this as a means to maintain services rather than passing on cuts to employees who suffer a double whammy of job losses or increased pressure in work, and cuts and increased council tax.

It is a political choice whether to fight the cuts or to wring your hands and say there's nothing you can do.

Yet again in 2020 the council has embarked on a sham public consultation. There is no mention in the online public consultation on the 2020-2023 budget about cuts the council is proposing to make. The word cuts has been substituted by the words efficiencies and savings.

While the budget settlement has resulted in less cuts than first envisaged, £16.5 million cuts on top of previous cuts implemented will make a bad situation a lot worse.

We are opposed to increasing the charges for car parking, increased charges for public conveniences, increased cemetery charges and asking for voluntary £1 donations for breakfast clubs. We are opposed to higher charges for sports facilities.

West Wales is the poorest region of northern Europe. Many families are



photo Garry Knight/CC

struggling to cope now and many employees' families are receiving benefits - these increased charges will make it increasingly difficult for families to keep their heads above water, or will result in the public using important services less.

We call on councillors to vote no to cuts and to call on other councils and the Welsh Assembly to join the fight against cuts; to build mass opposition with the trade unions, anti-cuts campaigners and the public that will force or encourage this Tory government to provide relief funding to Carmarthenshire and other local authorities that have had to deplete their reserves and adopt

temporary one-off budget-balancing measures to maintain vital public services.

■ Peterborough - Tories end 'honeymoon' with ruthless attack on the most vulnerable

Peterborough City Council - where the Conservatives are the largest party - has approved a budget which will bring in tax rises, redundancies and cuts to services.

Despite talk of the Tories repaying working-class people for electing

them in the general election, austerity is far from over at local level. Despite the budget being approved on 15 January, more 'savings' will need to be found before April, meaning the cuts will go much further.

Council tax will rise 4%, the maximum allowed. Band D taxpayers, for example, will see a rise of nearly £55 a year on their bill.

Over 75 council redundancies are planned. A similar number of contractor staff working for a range of frontline services could be lost.

In a ruthless attack on services relied upon by those most in need, £1.7 million will be cut from care and support.

Services affected by the budget include:

- Peterborough Community Assistance Scheme helps people who would need crisis loans or urgent assistance
- KingsGate Community Church works with volunteers to provide food banks and runs Care Zone which provides furniture and white goods
- Rainbow Saver Anglia provides bank accounts to people with poor credit who could not access one on the high street
- Age UK runs a number of council



photo Paul Mattsson

services for the council

■ Citizens' Advice Bureau helps unemployed people, those in debt, those suffering breakdowns and anyone at risk of homelessness

Reablement flats, LifeLine personal-alarm support, children's and youth services, school transport, winter-fuel payments and the Culture and Leisure Trust all come under attack by the Tories.

They say they will "support all affected groups to find alternative funding" and that the community will be "empowered" (read: expected) to take on the running of the services.

Labour councillors must put forward alternative budgets which refuse to make cuts and instead meet the needs of citizens, using reserves and borrowing powers where necessary. To that end, they must be prepared to campaign with trade unions and anti-cuts and community campaigners.

We must show the Tories that despite winning the election, the fight is far from over.

Carl Harper
Peterborough

■ Swansea - Socialist Party challenges Labour cuts and tax hikes

It has become an annual event. Swansea Socialist Party is the only organised force that has consistently challenged the council on cuts.

We attended the 9 January council cabinet meeting. We put forward a legal no-cuts budget solution to the imposition of Tory austerity.

A one-off, general election-related deal from the Tories, and a Welsh government pay-out have softened £18 million in planned cuts. The council have claimed they're putting money into departments instead of cutting, for the first time in years.

But a council-tax hike will hit the pockets of residents.

Socialist Party member Alec Thraves and council leader Rob Stewart had a heated debate, published on Wales Online - see 'Irritated council chiefs take exception to claim services have been cut to the bone' at walesonline.co.uk.

Alec pointed to the £70 million cuts over the past three years. Some departments have been cut by up to 50% and further cuts are still on the block.

Council leader Rob Stewart had the audacity to suggest that local

services have been improved by devastating cuts passed on by the Labour authority since their election in 2012. The cabinet congratulated itself on another year 'successfully' administering Tory austerity.

That evening it was revealed that 125 local hospital beds were being 'blocked' by patients unable to leave due to a lack of social workers - this department has seen drastic cuts. In stark contrast to what was suggested by the council leader, this is the reality of cuts.

Any apparent pause in austerity in Swansea will only be temporary, and will not begin to reinstate the decline in services and job losses. And the above-inflation rise in council tax, another austerity attack, will hurt.

We will continue to put pressure on Labour councillors, and the authority, to change their tactic and take up a legal no-cuts budget to challenge austerity and the Tory government.

Gareth Bromhall
Swansea Socialist Party

■ Enfield North Labour Party - Councillors urged to oppose cuts

Enfield North Labour Party executive committee has reinforced its no-cuts position and agreed to implement the resolution that the Constituency Labour Party adopted last year.

The resolution, passed in January 2019, urged Enfield Labour councillors to adopt a "brave and principled position opposing the cuts and demanding that central government immediately grants funding back to pre-austerity 2010 levels."

It called for a no-cuts budget, using the council's financial reserves and borrowing powers. And to build and mobilise a grassroots mass campaign of support for the councillors that do that.

The resolution suggested a conference to be convened "inviting all interested organisations (trade unions, anti-cuts campaign groups, tenants associations and community organisations etc) to come and discuss and then agree on the practical measures needed to support the councillors and resist austerity."

That meeting is now urgently being organised by Enfield North executive committee. Council budget-setting day is 26 February and a rally outside the council building is also planned.

North London Socialist Party

"If you think bus and rail services are crap, sign our petition to take them back"



photo Socialist Party

I am a public transport commuter, and to say there has been a steady decline in services over the past three years would be an understatement. I catch a minimum of 15 buses a week and have to report at least two a week that don't turn up.

The biggest change came after First Bus closed down their local Rotherham depot, to save money, and started running all their

services from the Sheffield depot, in another city, eight miles away.

I also catch five trains a week between Sheffield and Rotherham, run by 'Northern Rail'. These are late on a regular basis.

For this reason, and hearing similar complaints daily from fellow commuters, our Socialist Party branch decided to start a campaign about public transport.

The Sheffield City Region Mayor, Barnsley Blairite MP Dan Jarvis, has powers to introduce bus regulation under a franchise model like Transport for London, and is currently consulting about options to improve services.

We did a campaign stall outside Rotherham Interchange with a petition supporting regulation of buses as a step towards public ownership and for nationalisation of rail services. This could increase punctuality and reduce fares which otherwise will keep increasing.

The stall was very successful, especially when we started saying: "If you think bus and rail services are crap, sign our petition to take them back." We collected near to 100 signatures and a good amount of donations for the Socialist Party fighting fund.

What struck me most was the number of elderly passengers affected by bus service removals.

One woman explained that she now has to walk for half an hour after two of her services had been cut. Doing so had caused her to have a bad fall, breaking bones.

The actions of these profiteering companies have direct consequences on people's lives. They neither realise nor care about this as long as the shareholders are in pocket.

We say take them back.

Tom Lynn
South Yorkshire Socialist Party

Ketheswaran Sritharan
East London Socialist Party

Tamil Solidarity hosted its annual general meeting (AGM) on 11 January. The meeting was attended by 20 people and reflected the strength of the campaign.

The meeting was chaired by Lanya - a Socialist Party member and Tamil Solidarity organising committee member. Union representatives included Socialist Party member April Ashley from public sector union Unison, there in a personal capacity.

It is evident that young people have begun playing leading roles in the campaign, with new would-be members showing great interest in the campaign. A political discussion followed - led by Senan, another Socialist Party member.

Tamil Solidarity was not surprised by the appointment of Gotabaya Rajapaksa - head of the ministry of defence during the 2009 bloody genocide against Tamils - as president of Sri Lanka in March 2019. Tamil Solidarity, the Socialist Party and other diaspora members protested against the racist meeting hosted



Building Tamil Solidarity with youth and the trade unions

by Rajapaksa's army generals in Britain.

The political discussion also focused on India. The new citizenship law singles out Muslims from certain countries as not eligible for citizenship. Tamil Solidarity will protest with others in London on 25 January.

The meeting concluded by agreeing that this year the emphasis is to work to build a fightback against

Gotabaya, linking it with the struggles in India, to develop the youth arm of Tamil Solidarity and the Refugee Rights campaign, develop the trade union team and finally invest in our own media - Ethir.

■ Say no to racism - Revoke Citizenship Amendment Act
■ Assemble 1pm, opposite 10 Downing Street, march to Indian High Commission

ROBERT BURNS: OF THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

The most accomplished poet and songwriter of Scotland, Robert Burns (1759-96), was 'just' a poor farmer from Ayrshire and later low-paid public sector worker in Dumfries. He had very limited formal schooling but a voracious appetite for classical literature, philosophy and politics. Ahead of Burns Night (25 January) **Brent Kennedy** celebrates the 18th century radical democrat.

Burns occupies such an iconic position in Scottish culture that many folk wrongly think that Burns Night is a celebration of Scotland rather than his birthday.

True, no one represents the best of Scottish society more than this labourer. He donated his time to preserve or improve hundreds of traditional Scottish songs and poems, saved the Lowlands dialect from the anglophile "parcel of rogues" in Edinburgh, and with his own works personally made an unrivalled enrichment of the national heritage.

But the humanity of this unashamed internationalist is so universal that he belongs to us all - all who oppose class inequality, cruel oppression and war.

He was a patriot to the people, but his people were the exhausted family farmers, the impoverished and disinherited victims of the clearances, the Senegalese slaves of Virginia and the sans-culottes of revolutionary Paris.

The Scottish and British upper classes and their warring imperialism he despised and ridiculed in many poems, eg 'A man's a man'.

For two centuries the state, church and literary establishments gave us a distorted, sanitised selection of the romantic poet, denying or suppressing his revolutionary propaganda and his erotic Bawdy. But they all hang together.

You can't understand his love of nature and his desire for a respectful place for humanity within it, and his open, honest enjoyment of social life and shared sexual pleasure, without also understanding his rage against the injustices of class society which prevent a natural, social and personal harmonic development.

Burns was able to write so creatively and fight so determinedly for his political ideas because he had a self-confidence, independence of thought and expectation of social equality born of class consciousness and a disdain for subservience and conformity.

This was a product of the social changes sweeping 18th century Scotland and beyond - the spread of capitalism causing shifting class relations, universal literacy in Scotland and Presbyterian ideas of individual responsibility, the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Revolution.

Burns screams a challenging questioning of the unjust social order in 'Man was made to mourn':

*The sun that overhangs yon moors,
Out-spreading far and wide,
Where hundreds labour to support
A haughty lordling's pride; ...*

*...If I'm design'd yon lordling's slave,
By Nature's law design'd,
Why was an independent wish
E'er planted in my mind?
If not, why am I subject to
His cruelty, or scorn?
Or why has man the will and pow'r
To make his fellow mourn?*

Even more dangerous for the ruling class was his insolent, republican challenge to the monarchy and their state power:

*For me! before a monarch's face
Ev'n there I winna flatter;
For neither pension, post, nor place,
Am I your humble debtor:*

This prepared him well for the period of radicalisation and upheaval which swept Scotland and Ireland following the French Revolution.

In 1782 there were eight newspapers in Scotland, months after the revolution there were 27, and reading societies, debating clubs and radical political groups sprang up everywhere.

One of the lasting prejudices of the literati to the radical ploughboy is his bawdy poetry, which was part of the European culture of folk humour.

Now he uses Bawdy not just as a general social means of reminding the haughty snobs of a commonality of man, but as a direct political means of humiliating them through their defeat by the French common masses in 'Why suppose no poor folk mowe?' (mowe is to have sex):

By sea and by shore! the Emp-r-r swore,



Burns was further radicalised by the power of the masses in the French Revolution of 1789

*In Paris he'd kick up a row;
But Paris sae ready just leugh at the laddie
And bade him gae tak him a mowe.*

In 1792 Liberty Trees symbolising the revolution were planted, an effigy of the hated Home Secretary Dundas was burned and the Whig radicals announced a bill to reform the corrupt parliament and replace the Tories.

Burns naively pins his hopes on the Whig gentlemen in 'Here's a health to them that's awa'. Radical democratic change seems inevitable. 'The tree of liberty' offers a better future:

*Wi' plenty o' sic trees, I trow,
The world would live in peace, man;
The sword would help to mak a plough,
The din o' war wad cease, man.
Like brethren in a common cause,
We'd on each other smile, man;
And equal rights and equal laws
Wad gladden every isle, man.*

But faced with this challenge to their power, and with the French masses demanding universal suffrage, the peasants taking the land off the aristocrats, and the revolutionary armies going on a counter-offensive against the reactionary despots of Europe, the Tories set up a dictatorship of military rule and brutal suppression of democratic rights.

Freedom of speech and the press are banned, trade unions outlawed, artisans blacklisted for their political views, opponents hung or

sent to die in Australia, British troops shoot starving Britons demanding bread. Eventually the sailors mutiny. This is the answer of the Tories and the ruling class to the danger from democracy by "the swinish multitude" as Burke called us.

As the middle classes now "abjure their democratic doings", and give up the fight, Burns becomes more defiant and revolutionary:

*Grant me, indulgent Heaven,
that I may live,
To see the miscreants feel the pains they give;
Deal Freedom's sacred treasures free as air,
Till Slave and Despot be but things that were.*

Perhaps the highpoint of Burns' developing ideas and his guiding legacy to us today is this poem (drafted by an English radical worker and improved by Burns) which points to a peaceful, classless society reached via revolution:

*Why should we idly waste our prime
Repeating our oppressions?
Come rouse to arms! 'Tis now the time
To punish past transgressions.
'Tis said that Kings can do no wrong -
Their murderous deeds deny it,
And, since from us their power is sprung,
We have a right to try it.
Now each true patriot's song shall be: -
'Welcome Death or Libertie!'*

Proud Priests and Bishops we'll translate



*And canonize as Martyrs;
The guillotine on Peers shall wait;
And Knights shall hang in garters.
Those Despots long have trode us down,
And Judges are their engines:
Such wretched minions of a Crown
Demand the people's vengeance!
To-day 'tis theirs. Tomorrow we
Shall don the Cap of Libertie!*

*The Golden Age we'll then revive:
Each man will be a brother;
In harmony we all shall live,
And share the earth together;
In Virtue train'd, enlighten'd Youth
Will love each fellow-creature;
And future years shall prove the truth
That Man is good by nature:
Then let us toast with three times three
The reign of Peace and Libertie!*



The Socialist Inbox

Do you have something to say?

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■ Real socialism

Even Blairite Jess Philips now calls herself "socialist", as do all the Labour leadership candidates; and as did the SNP candidate who beat Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson in December's general election.

When I joined the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated) in 2002, only a decade after Stalinism collapsed in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, we were probably the only political trend that consistently used the word "socialist".

Many on the left said we were using old, unpopular ideas that were dead. The difference is the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis. Capitalism objectively is crisis-ridden and holds very little political legitimacy, not just for the working class, but big layers of the middle

class. But what is socialism? Is it a moral idea about equality and maybe raising taxes for the very wealthy? I think the next decade will show socialism is actually about working-class struggle.

As the working class moves into struggle the current radical generalised interest in socialistic ideas will develop into a real militant socialist consciousness.

Real socialism means working-class control and management of the commanding heights of the economy. It means a higher level of production and technique than even the most advanced capitalist technologies. To obtain this a bitter struggle is required, with refined instruments tested in struggle like a party with a programme offering a way forward and based on the lessons of working-class history.

Matt Dobson
Glasgow



French trade unionists marching against Macron's pensions' attacks photo James Ivens

■ Defend pensions

Everyone has been enthused by the mass strike action in France and news that the government has been forced to make concessions on employee pensions. But workers in France should be careful, we've been here before in Britain (in 2011 when a majority of trade union leaderships abandoned the public sector workers' strike action and sold out the pensions' struggle).

The French government has only temporarily backed down on the retirement age but still wants to cut workers' hard-earned pensions.

It is insisting on meetings with the unions to agree how to reduce overall costs, all aimed at persuading

the public that existing pensions are 'unaffordable'.

The proposals have been welcomed by the 'moderate' CFDT union federation but the CGT union is calling on the action to continue. In a recent interview, the CGT explained that: "The letter (from the government) changes nothing... This is not dialogue!" "He (the prime minister) tells us that we need €13 billion in savings and that we have to manage to find the solutions!"

"The way out is for ALL employees to strike together - then the government will have no choice but to withdraw its entire bill."

Martin Powell-Davies
Cumbria

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



Socialist Party members and trade unionists picket New Scotland Yard against police spies photo SP

■ Prevent attacks

Not only did the British state spy on the Socialist Party and other left groups, anti-racist campaigners, environmentalists and trade union militants - as very well documented by the COPS campaign over Met police spying - now they outrageously deem us all "terrorists" according to a Counter Terrorism Policing guide under the government's reactionary Prevent scheme.

In the North of Ireland and elsewhere, some of us spent decades campaigning against brutal state terror and repression, arguing against the blind ally of 'individual terror', while fighting for the rights of the nationally and religiously oppressed, and all other discriminated against groups.

Now in the schools in England, Scotland and Wales, where the capitalist state 'celebrates' the winning of rights for minorities - that successive right-wing governments

opposed for decades - everyone from the Socialist Party to Greenpeace, is scandalously being demonised as potential "terrorists".

This is a serious attack on political and civil rights, and a dangerous signal to education authorities and reactionaries, that must be fought tooth and nail by the left and the workers' movement.

Niall Mulholland
East London

■ Prevent propaganda

In the light of the recently leaked police 'anti-terrorism guide' we, as socialists, trade unionists and community activists, must oppose in the strongest sense the suggestion that our organisations and campaigns are in anyway comparable to the violent extremism of the far-right, neo-Nazi and fascist

hate groups active in the UK today.

This dangerous and unfounded theory that suggests that far-left and far-right are equal in their danger to the general public is being used to undermine us and our ideas.

Although the government has claimed that the leaked anti-terrorism guide has now been recalled, the fact that it was published in the first place shows the reality of the way we are seen by the government and the capitalist class. We are seen as a threat.

We should organise to fight back against these attacks and to defend those among us who are targeted by the government for standing against racism, climate catastrophe and all the iniquities of the capitalism system.

Gareth Bromhall
Swansea and West Wales
Socialist Party

■ Unhealthy research

A recent Wellcome Trust survey outlined the extent of poor mental health among researchers due to a culture of overwork, bullying and harassment.

But I disagree with research culture lead Beth Thompson when she says: "No one set out to create a bad system that damages people's mental health, but we have unintentionally created a system that values the excellence of research

outputs without paying enough attention to how that research is done."

It isn't an unintentional research system we have; it's come out of decades of marketisation. The logic of the market and capitalism itself to drive down costs and ramp up productivity or "outputs" with no regard for human or environmental damage done as a consequence.

As long as toxic work cultures in research are seen as an accident, any solutions posed will be misguided at best.

A Guardian article on the subject quotes a scientist doubting the efficacy of promoting a 'health culture' when the issue is in fact workloads: "Many colleagues feel that without the drive or ability to force institutional change, they have no option but to wait for an inevitable collapse of the system and try to pick up the pieces afterwards," he said.

Bea Gardner
Southampton

SOCIALISM TODAY

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INDIA: HUGE GENERAL STRIKE BUT A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Jagadish Chandra
New Socialist Alternative
(CWI in India)

This year's planned general strike on 8 January was massive. It broke all previous records in the numbers involved in united class action in India. The strike was called by ten major trade union bodies under the banner of the Joint Committee of Trade Unions, linked to many opposition parties.

The main demand was the "reversal of the anti-worker, anti-people, anti-national policies of the government," including the dropping of any decisions for the privatisation of the state-owned companies Air India and Bharat Petroleum.

Undoubtedly, the general strike was a huge success numerically. The overall participation in the strike of 250 million was an increase of 30 million from the 220 million of 2019.

Inevitably, both the state and the administration across the country worked overtime to see that the visible impact of this collective class action was minimised.

Attacks

Over the years, as crisis-ridden Indian capitalism has begun to offload its burden onto the urban working poor and the beleaguered rural peasantry, the general struggle of resistance has taken many forms.

It has shown itself in many intensified cross-class struggles that have taken place throughout the country, not necessarily led in an organised way or expressing clear demands. But the poor expressed their anger and frustration in the form of localised bandhs (stoppages), 'railroko' (stopping trains) and many times state-wide and country-wide bandhs.

While industrial workers of many different sectors all over the country went on strike, the peasants and agricultural workers massively responded to the call of a 'rural bandh' and organised road and rail blockades (see socialistworld.net for a comprehensive list of sectors and states affected).

Linking struggles

The trade unions put forward a 12-point programme of demands on basic economic and work-related issues.

In the midst of the mass protests sweeping the country against the government's attacks on democratic rights, the unions also protested against the outrageous onslaught by Modi's BJP government on the basic tenets of the constitution through the Citizenship Amendment Act



What could have been a real opportunity for the left to mount a challenge against the Modi regime was instead frittered away, without any serious attempt to build a struggle

(CAA), the national register of citizens (NRC) and the national population register (NPR).

The CAA allows citizenship to people who have fled to India from persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan before December 2014. However, this does not apply to Muslims, rendering them stateless.

The state apparatus was extremely worried about the social and political fall-out if the forces of the general strike and those of the sporadic and spontaneous movement against the CAA had joined together.

Despondency

The last six years of aggressive, neoliberal economic attacks, mixed with non-stop majoritarian Hindutva communal onslaughts, had numbed even the most politically advanced sections.

Given the absence of a leadership with a far-sighted perspective to combat and thwart the juggernaut of Modi's right-wing Hindutva (promoting the dominance of Hindu culture) regime, naturally a sense of despair existed among some workers and youth.

The twin fiascos of 2016 - demonetisation* and the Goods and Services Tax - that brought enormous misery to the middle class and the poor across the country, went almost unchallenged.

What could have been a real opportunity for the left to mount a challenge against the Modi regime was instead frittered away, without any serious attempt to build a struggle. This is particularly the case with demonetisation which caused more than 180 deaths in the span of ten weeks, including ordinary bank workers.

The irony is that 70% of bank employees are organised under the banner of two unions - the All India Bank Employees Association and the Bank Employees Federation of India - aligned to the left parties CPI and CPI(M).

Following that missed opportunity, traders and vendors were up in arms against the notorious Goods and Services Act, which resulted in massive job losses in the service sector of the economy to the tune of almost five million jobs. This too went largely unchallenged.

It is in this context that the second victory of prime minister Narendra Modi in the May 2019 general election has to be seen.

Soon after, Modi went on to abrogate the constitutional guarantees to the people of Jammu and Kashmir - which of course led to mass protests in the occupied territories that are still being brutally suppressed.

Many of those in opposition to Modi's regime are either under house arrest or behind bars.

With this forced silence and with a parliamentary opposition that had no idea of putting up a fight, the left gave up even the thought of extra-parliamentary struggle.

Anger erupts

Then Modi's sinister move to surreptitiously bring in the Citizenship Amendment Bill, and then bulldoze it through parliament with just a mere seven hours debate, triggered the anger of the masses.

It started in the state of Assam, which had already seen the disastrous exercise of a National Register of Citizens. Across the country angry youth spontaneously poured on to the streets with a clear battle cry of "enough is enough!" The protests are still raging unabated.

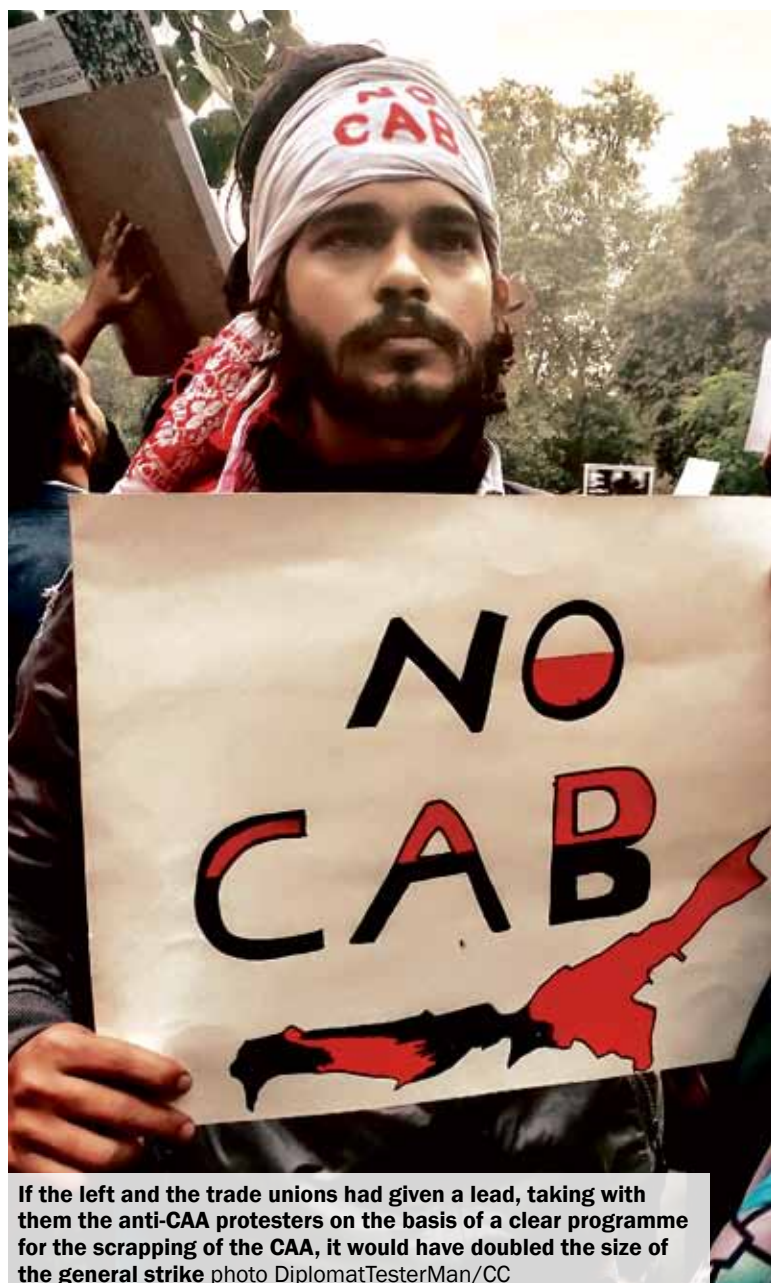
It is very clear from the course of events that the left in general has been found wanting. The general strike meant it had an opportunity to change the scenario from one of helplessness to an all-out struggle against the Modi regime.

It's no exaggeration to say that if the left and the trade unions had given a lead, taking with them the anti-CAA protesters on the basis of a clear programme for the scrapping of the CAA, it would have had an electrifying effect among both the organised working class and the non-organised mass of people, who have formed the bulk of the anti-CAA protests.

The 250 million figure for the numbers participating in the general strike would then have easily been double that number.

Instead, the left parties, and thus the trade union leaders, were too reluctant to mount an all-out challenge against the Modi regime.

Only after being forced by sections of the rank and file, did they include at the last minute a demand against the CAA - added as the 13th demand and extending



If the left and the trade unions had given a lead, taking with them the anti-CAA protesters on the basis of a clear programme for the scrapping of the CAA, it would have doubled the size of the general strike photo DiplomatTesterMan/CC

the customary solidarity in order to save face.

It was criminal not to campaign against the CAA with all their class might. It shows how out-of-touch are these so-called 'communist parties' are with the situation on the ground. They act and behave like any other opposition party based on the middle class, without any perspective of struggle or a combative programme to unite the masses.

They are fetters on the working class and the oppressed, preventing them from finding the road to a revolutionary change in society.

New Socialist Alternative's (CWI India) leaflet, demanding the scrapping of the CAA, explained that the ongoing country-wide protest against the Modi regime is full of radical potential.

The urgent task for the Marxist fighters around New Socialist Alternative is laid out very clearly. We must reach those combative youth and convince them of the

need for the struggle to scrap the CAA/NRC/NPR to be fought on class lines, with clear demands.

■ **Full article on socialistworld.net**

*The withdrawal and replacement of higher currency notes - which was meant to expose unaccounted wealth - failed. Instead, it cost the economy over 1% in total output and led to 1.5 million job losses.



The strike movement against the French government's wholesale attack on pensions has gone on for almost two months.

Many transport workers downed tools for 45 continuous days, joined by some other sectors on the unions' national days of action.

The Socialist spoke to striking teacher **Virginie Pregny**, a member of Gauche Révolutionnaire, the Socialist Party's sister party in France, in Paris on 17 January.

Why are you on strike?

The strike started because of a so-called 'reform' about the pension system, which will result - if it were to be implemented - in a drastic fall in the pensions workers will earn.

Who has been on strike?

All the workers are really under attack. Public and private. The movement started on 5 December 2019, with a huge day of general strike. And then railway workers, and metro and bus workers, kept on the strike. They were then joined by a few teachers.

After New Year, more sectors came on strike. So more and more teachers; but also civil servants in the city councils, for example; also some workers in the oil refining industry, dockers, etc.

So this has been a strike of about 40 days?

Yeah. Railway workers - and metro, bus workers, of Paris mainly - have been on strike for 40 days. But then in other sectors, the strike hasn't been on indefinite terms for most of them.

What's the mood like among the strikers?

Obviously it's very diverse. But the common point is the determination, which is fuelled by the anger at this government.

All these ministers who demand us to work more, to earn less. And at the same time, they've been caught red-handed hiding how much they earn, not paying their taxes.

For example, the minister responsible for the pension reform - he earns more than €20,000 a month. Come on! And now he's telling us that pensions are too high, that there is no money, and that we need to cut our own pensions. So there is a real, deep anger.

The movement hasn't won yet. It's been a long strike. Is there still militancy?

There is still militancy. It's quite incredible. Today the Louvre museum was blocked by strikers. Tomorrow the opera dancers and musicians, who are on strike, will organise a concert somewhere. You have school blockades; road blockades; everything that can be blockaded is blockaded at some point or the other!

And the interesting thing is that whenever you have an election meeting by Macron's party candidate [for the March local elections], it is disrupted. The minister for women had an electoral meeting. And it was invaded by strikers, and she had to leave by the back door!

FRANCE STRIKER SPEAKS: REAL, DEEP ANGER NEEDS UNION STRATEGY



photo Cécile Rimboud, all other photos James Ivens

L'égalité, the paper of Gauche Révolutionnaire...



...on the protests



Gauche Révolutionnaire campaign stall...



...and Paris branch meeting, Virginie Pregny (second left)

The government has said it is suspending part of the reform. One of the union confederations, the CFDT, has called off strikes for negotiations. What does this represent?

The suspension is not really a retreat. They announced it in the middle of a big demonstration, which is quite interesting - and you had people chanting: 'we are not suspending our movement!'

It's a way to try and break the movement - demobilise some sectors, and isolate the most militant workers. The capitalists are aware of the radicalisation and the politicisation that is going on right now and

that's what they fear.

It really looked for workers like an act. I mean, two weeks before the government announced the suspension, they insisted on this question of at what age you will be allowed to ask for your pension, 64, knowing that the CFDT would not agree.

And then they suspended it, so that this union came back to the negotiating table, and they could say: look - you see? We are negotiating! And the union was also happy to say: you see? We have an influence on the government! Very clever. But workers - they didn't buy it.

The CFDT union leadership have

always been seen as traitors. In whatever circumstances, they will negotiate. And they're in big trouble inside their own ranks now, it seems.

We should call on these workers and tell them: OK, now, look at what your leader is doing. You don't have to accept this. Come with us if you think that we should strike now.

What next steps are needed for this strike to win?

There is the question of how do we generalise the strike. We have a massive strike, but we also know that it's mainly in the public sector for the moment. How do we reach

to all these people who support the movement? 61% support the movement, but they are not on strike.

Because for many workers, their wages are already so low, their living conditions are so difficult, that they think: OK - this pensions thing - either I die before I get it, or I earn so little that I'm not even sure I can claim a pension.

So we need demands that link the pension reforms to all the other attacks, and workers' real conditions. So on wages, housing, public services.

How can that struggle be organised?

For the moment, the strike relies on the workers' determination. Because the unions hadn't been organising much prior to this, there are some weaknesses - in terms of demands, in terms of democratic organisation.

We need general assemblies of strikers in each workplace every day. These general assemblies must not just be discussions, but also decision-making bodies. We need to elect representatives who then would come back to the workers and be answerable for their actions.

There are a lot of workers' traditions that have been lost in the past period. For example, when you are on strike, going to your next-door workplace. Call on the workers, have a leaflet, discuss why you are on strike, why they should join.

But workers need to experience it to realise that, OK, we need to do this differently. So there's a start of reflection about that among workers, on how we can be more efficient, how we can be more democratic.

And moreover, there is this political question. I think the main reason the strike movement is slowing down is that question, the political question. If we get rid of Macron, what do we do?

[Left-wing political leader Jean-Luc] Mélenchon had some good publicity and good votes in the last election. But he is saying there is a difference between the social movement and the political movement; that it's not his responsibility to teach workers what they should do.

So obviously this is not helping. We need a workers' party.

We also have to challenge the leadership of the unions. They are not proposing a strategy for the strike. They are just following up: OK, workers are on strike, so we are just behind. And if the movement retreats - because after 40, 50, 60 days with nothing, people will go back to work - the unions will say: OK, we've tried, but we've lost, and that's life.

So it's really urgent now that we reclaim our unions. And that's also part of the work that Gauche Révolutionnaire is trying to do.

Of course, we are trying to recruit to Gauche Révolutionnaire. But we are also trying to build the unions on a fighting, democratic programme, with a strategy for the strike. Arming the workers with ideas so they can intervene in the union, organise other workers, and try to eventually be in a position where we can have fighting, democratic unions.

■ Read the full interview at socialistworld.net

As the super-rich gather in Davos...

END CLIMATE CHANGE END INEQUALITY END CAPITALISM!

■ Global strikes and mass protests against the effects of capitalism point the way forward

On one side, the global rich elite wine and dine at their annual shindig in Davos. On the other, millions around the world face poverty, war and environmental destruction.

According to Oxfam, just 2,153 billionaires have more wealth between them than 4.6 billion people on the planet.

Some of the representatives of these super-rich at the World Economic Forum (WEF) will be hypocritically wringing their hands about global inequality and climate change. Not because they are worried about the lives of the poorest. What keeps them awake at night is fear of the mass global protests taking place in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, and the threat these potentially pose to their profits and the capitalist system they defend.

This year the organisers of the WEF have declared that they want to create a more sustainable world. Companies, they say, must look beyond profits. Even they understand the effect that the pursuit of profit is having on the environment, on inequality and in provoking mass unrest.

But profit-making is in the very DNA of capitalism. It's a broken system that cannot be made more 'humane' and 'sustainable' by pleading with the 'good



photo Paul Mattsson

nature' of individual capitalists.

The only way that the big corporations will look beyond profits is if they are publicly owned and democratically controlled by working people - as part of a planned economy that prioritises the needs of the majority and the environment, and not those of a rich minority.

The massive protests in Chile, Iraq, Lebanon,

France and other countries, and the global climate strikes, are all in opposition to the devastating effects the capitalist system and its political representatives are having on our lives. The next task is to build political organisations that can unite working-class and poor people not just against the effects of capitalism but in opposition to the system itself and its replacement by socialism.

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