

thesocialistpostbag

Do you have something to say?

Send your news, views and criticism in not more than 150 words to Socialist Postbag, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, or phone 020 8988 8771, email: editors@socialistparty.org.uk. We reserve the right to shorten letters. Don't forget to give your name, address and phone number. Confidentiality will be respected if requested.

Shallow opposition

I would be wrong to say I enjoyed watching the webcast of Coventry city council's 10 August meeting (www.coventry.gov.uk/webcast) as they discussed millions of pounds of 'in year' cuts, but it was pretty instructive. Not only did it clearly show why we need more Socialist Party councillors, as Dave Nellist was the only person to speak and vote against the budget, but also just how shallow the Labour Party's opposition to cuts is. In Brighton where Labour are in opposition they have been (when in front of a TV camera) chanting: "No ifs, no buts, no public sector cuts!" Any chance someone could put together a voting record of Labour councils on this round of 'in year' budget cuts? I wouldn't mind reminding our local Labour councillors that it's actions not words that really count.

Phil Clarke
Brighton Socialist Party

Ed the Mili-tant?

Ed Miliband's visit to Carlisle to drum up support for his attempt to be next leader of the "New" Labour Party brought back less than favourable memories of his time in government. Miliband (Ed) did nothing to save green energy jobs at the Vestas plant on the Isle of Wight, neither did he do anything to save rail infrastructure jobs (some in his own Doncaster North constituency) when Jarvis went into administration leaving many workers without even the wages they'd worked for, pensions in danger and no redundancy money. Miliband must know that the rail engineering work undertaken by Jarvis workers under contract from Network Rail is still being done - but in many cases by sub-contractors with no pension scheme, lower wages, fewer conditions - sometimes on atrocious "zero hours contracts". When it comes to defending workers and their families Ed Miliband's record leaves much to be desired.

Craig Johnston
RMT Manchester and North
West national executive
member, Carlisle



Action gets results

The 'CWU members accept BT pay deal' article in The Socialist issue 635 showed a missed opportunity. But, I think the BT pay deal is significant. BT workers are one of only a small group to be receiving a pay rise in the midst of the recession.

Derek McMillan
East Grinstead, Sussex

BT workers shouldn't count themselves lucky in any respect; BT made £1bn in profit last year. We earned this pay rise by flexing our muscles and showing our strength. Management claimed that the previous offer was their final one. Every BT worker was sat down and told that this was all the company could afford. The threat of a strike forced management back to the negotiating table. BT workers will now feel they got the improved pay deal by threatening to strike. When BT come after workers' pay, conditions and pensions in the future, we know the threat and use of industrial action works.

BT worker and CWU member



Ground Zero Mosque

The American right is in uproar at plans to build a Mosque at Ground Zero, the site of the September 11 attacks. The reality is far less exciting. It is not a mosque, and it's not at Ground Zero. It is two and a half blocks away, with a McDonalds and Burger King being in closer proximity to Ground Zero. Park 51 or Cordoba House is an Islamic cultural centre complete with prayer room, food court, swimming pool, a basketball court, and a memorial to the people who lost their lives at 9/11.

I think Ground Zero would be a good place to build a Mosque. It would show that the racist division supported by Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda isn't shared by the rest of us.

Ian Pattison
Leeds Socialist Party

The Sky is mine

News Corporation - the misnamed Rupert Murdoch empire - is launching a million dollar lawsuit against Skype. The lawsuit concerns the first three letters of its name.

Murdoch's lawyers claim this word is Murdoch's personal property and want money from anyone else who uses it! To quote the Sun - another Murdoch property - "you couldn't make it up". The inhabitants of the Isle of Skye could be in trouble here and Murdoch's lawyers will have their sights on "the sky's the limit", "blue skies thinking" and the Skye Boat Song. So next time you sneak a peak at that thing - you know that blue thing up there - Murdoch could be after your money. And as for you Trot-sky-ists...watch out!

Zola's *Germinal*: still relevant today

It is 125 years since Emile Zola's *Germinal* was first published. Dave Gorton delves into one of the most renowned and important works of French literature.

GERMINAL WAS the 13th of Emile Zola's monumental 20-volume Rougon-Macquart series but, like all the books, stands alone and can be read without knowing any history of the characters or previous events.

Set in the coalfields on the French/Belgian border in 1867, it was the first 19th century novel to have a major strike as one of its central features, but *Germinal* was more than this.

It was written shortly after a period of revolution and counter-revolution throughout Europe, including France's revolutions of 1789 and 1848. Zola, who wouldn't have called himself a socialist at the time of writing *Germinal*, showed the battles taking place between competing class forces.

The disagreements between two of the central characters emulate debates between socialism and anarchism in the then newly formed First International.

Étienne

AT THE outset of the novel we accompany a wandering Étienne Lantier in his quest to earn a few sous to feed himself. He was hired at one of the many pits in the region, in horrendous inhumane conditions which Zola describes at some length.

Étienne was in contact with the First International and tries to sign up fellow miners to its ranks. Early on we read of "a rebellion [was] germinating in this narrow hole nearly six hundred metres below ground. Soon the voices rose in anger, and these men, blackened with coal and frozen with waiting, accused the company of killing half its employees underground and letting the other half die of hunger."

Anger let loose

AS THE employers tried to change payment methods (ie cut wages), that anger was let loose. The French mines employed through sub-contracting so that groups of workers had to bid to work on the 'better' seams, in the process undercutting their colleagues and neighbours.

The employers used arguments that will appear familiar to readers currently active in trade unions. To a delegation of miners that interrupted a bosses' dinner party to demand an increase in the basic rates of pay, the manager of the Montsou mines retorts: "Do you think that the company hasn't as much to lose



Germinal is part of the Emile Zola's Rougon-Macquart series.

in the present crisis as you have? It cannot fix wages as it likes, it must be competitive or go under. Why don't you blame the facts instead of the company?"

Hardship

THE WORKERS strike and receive massive support. Zola leads us through all the, still relevant and recognisable, facets of a strike: the attempts to widen it to other pits in the coalfield (today this would be secondary picketing); the excruciating hardship; the role of the women in support of their striking husbands, fathers, sons and daughters.

Zola makes it plainly clear that the women were as much to the fore, if not more so, than the 'menfolk'. Yet the brutal work and social conditions manifested themselves in the appalling treatment of women: "It was the usual thing, wasn't it? She had never imagined it would be anything else - raped behind the slag-heap, a baby at sixteen and then a poverty stricken home if her lover married her."

Rasseneur

ZOLA INTRODUCES us to Rasseigneur, formerly a militant miner turned reformist who owned a local bar: "Surely it was stupid to think the world could be changed at one blow... It would need perhaps thousands and thousands of years for that to come about... The wisest course, if you didn't want to come a cropper, was to go straight ahead with

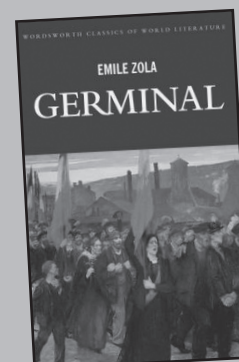
demanding feasible reforms and bettering the workers' conditions as and when the chances arose."

Germinal is also a great story. Zola, with the knowledge of the events that led to the Paris Commune, finished *Germinal* with an evocative passage:

"Men were springing up, a black avenging host was slowly germinating in the furrow, thrusting upwards for the harvests of future ages. And very soon their germination would crack the earth asunder."

Germinal

by Emile Zola
£3.99, plus £1.50 p&p

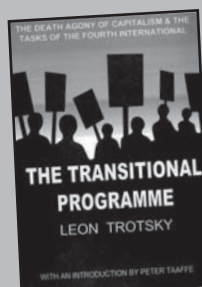


Available from Socialist Books, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD
Phone 020 8988 8789
Cheques payable to Socialist Books.
www.socialistbooks.co.uk

New edition

The Transitional Programme

by Leon Trotsky
With an introduction by Socialist Party general secretary Peter Taaffe



£2.50 plus 50p p&p from Socialist Party Wales
socialistpartywales@btinternet.com

Socialism Today

The Socialist Party's magazine September 2010 issue includes:

● **Cuts - the only alternative is to fight**
Hannah Sell on how to stop the cuts, with lessons from Liverpool and the poll tax campaigns.

● **PCS union debates political campaigning**
PCS vice-president John McNally, writing in a personal capacity, looks at the issues involved.

● **Defending union democracy**

Lynn Walsh dissects an Employment Tribunal judgement upholding a Unison witch-hunt



£2.50 including postage from:

Socialism Today PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, 020 8988 8773
Subscribe today: ten issues for only £18 (Europe £20, rest of the world £25)
socialismtoday@socialistparty.org.uk www.socialismtoday.org