

the Socialist postbag

Do you have something to say?

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Respite for carers

Following on from the Socialist's feature on the effect of the cuts on disabled people and their carers, I think the issue of respite is hugely important. We should demand better provision.

Not getting time off is the main cause of the high level of illness among carers (physical and psychological) - it causes relationships to breakdown and makes it impossible to think about even part-time work.

Efforts to support carers and the disabled seem to be largely directed to "advocacy" work - the Labour Party constantly refers to the "vulnerable", the charities are stuck in their third-sector mode - but actually many carers are just plain angry. Despite their lack of spare time, there is a potential for an organisation that raises fighting demands. Carers are not 'charity cases'.

Jane Peters
Gloucester

Socialism

I am a 17 year old student who recently transferred from a state to a grammar school to study my A-levels, after obtaining high enough grades at GCSE. The move further entrenched my left wing ideology, after witnessing the undeniable correlation between wealth and the schools.

I find it incomprehensible that in such an "advanced society" we allow wealth to affect such an undeniable right as education. Similarly I am utterly unable to see the logic in the argument for privatisation.

I believe that every person born into this world should be provided with an equal chance to succeed in their aspirations. It is the duty of those who have been provided with the head-start to success to make sure others have the same benefits as they did. For me socialism is about compassion and compassion is fundamental to humanity. It is for these reasons and numerous others that is it obligatory for me to join the Socialist Party. I feel vehemently in favour of all that this party represents.

Ryan Cooper
Cornwall

**Royal Wedding**

As the loss of jobs grows, the wedding of Kate Middleton and William should make us rethink how we could re-organise society.

Like the bankers who caused the crisis, the royal family and monarchy have cost us big money. Both are unaccountable and remote from ordinary workers. Neither the City or royal family have suffered much in the credit crunch, either. It's business as usual.

It's time to demand change in the financial system. Change that benefits us. And the only cuts should be to the royal family!

Graeme Kemp

Kissing ban

In the wake of the Soho 'kiss-in' protest at the John Snow pub, where hundreds of people demonstrated after two men were thrown out for sharing a snog, David Cameron has decided he wants to ban same-sex kissing on TV before 9pm. He has reportedly supported an independent recommendation to impose this ban, reaping outrage from lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people.

The Tory party has a long tradition of homophobia and transphobia, and yet just when you thought they couldn't get any more offensive, they think of another way to scapegoat LGBTQ people for going against their precious 'family values', which in reality stand for social conformity and control.

This is a cynical attempt to play on prejudices towards a minority in order to distract people from Tory cuts and the capitalist crisis.

Dave Younger

**World violence**

The World Bank has produced its latest World Development Report, which focuses on armed conflict and the impact it has on economic development. It concludes, unsurprisingly, that war and violence has a detrimental effect on the quality of life - but overwhelmingly that of the world's poorest people. The Financial Times (26 April), put it this way, "rich countries provide money, markets and weapons that motivate and aggravate violence in poor ones".

The report shows that average annual civil war "battle deaths" have declined since the collapse of the Soviet Union from around 170,000 per year in the 1980s to "only" 42,000 a year now. However, as the report suggests, the nature of the violence has mutated - so these bald global figures hide more than they reveal.

The trend in numbers of deaths, if you start around 1990, has been downward; so too with the trend in the number of countries experiencing civil war. However, starting from 1960, the trend in civil war countries remains on an upward course. There were around 15 civil war countries in 1960, peaking at over 50 in 1990. In 2008, there were around 35 - but the report was prepared before the onset of the middle east revolutions!

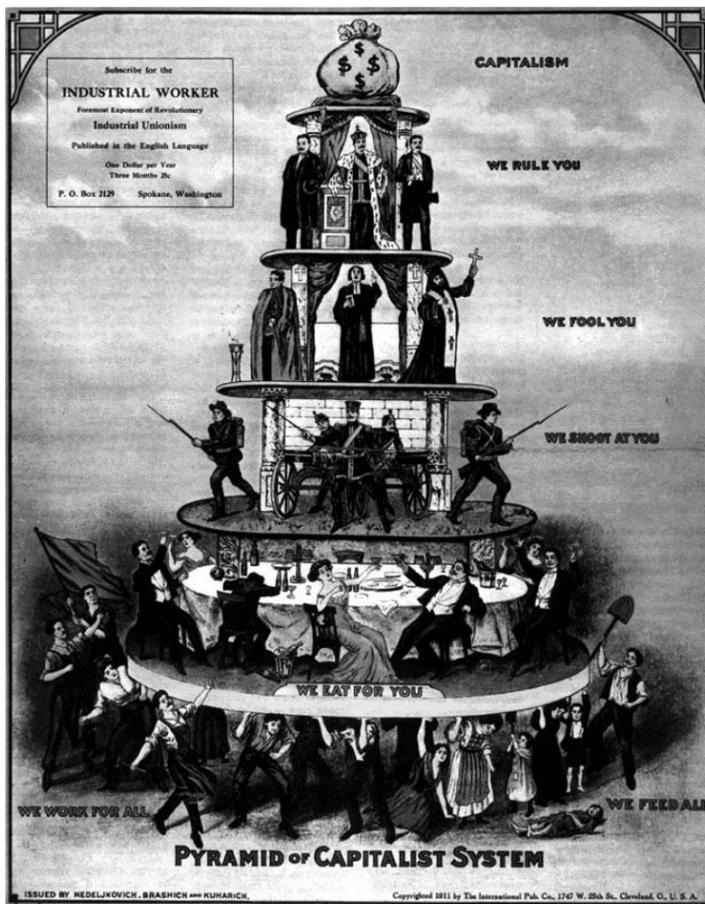
As might be expected from such a generalised report (and one which takes the future of big business capitalism as a given), the causes of war and violence are complex and varied. Nonetheless, according to the report, the key underlying cause, common across the world of chaos, is the "absence of legitimate institutions that provide citizens security, justice and jobs". Don't expect much of these whilst capitalism dominates the globe!

Steve Appleton
Sutton

Book review and anniversary

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists by Robert Tressell is a classic book, which every socialist should read. Although written in the early part of the last century its ideas and characters are fresh and interesting. Its author was a worker who died 100 years ago in poverty but this article and review by ROY FARRAR, reprinted from 1977, shows how his legacy lives on.



Noonan explains the workings of the capitalist system in the book

On a bright June day in Liverpool in 1977 hundreds of trade unionists and socialists took part in a march to rally at the final resting place of Robert Noonan - known more popularly as Robert Tressell, author of "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists".

In a rough, weed-choked field opposite Walton Jail we gathered to unveil a marble plaque to mark the grave. This wasteland held the bones of over 1,000 paupers, their bodies wrapped in canvas bags, stitched up by former inmates of the jail, and cast into mass graves.

Local activists had located the grave of Robert Noonan, plus the names of the 12 others interned with him, and all had been etched into the black stone. Robert had died of tuberculosis in Liverpool Royal Infirmary at the age of 40 in 1911.

Why this homage to Robert Noonan? He was a member of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation but as far as we know he did not lead any mass campaign or strike. He wrote only one book, a novel about working class life prior to World War One.

Shortly after joining the Labour Party Young Socialists in 1966 a worn copy of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was pressed into my hand with the recommendation that I may find it a good read. An understatement if ever there was one.

Turning the pages I was drawn into the tale of a year in the life of an Edwardian town in southern England. It revealed how the capitalist system rules and exploits workers - an accurate historical account of the lives of working people, and more, a condemnation of the horrors of capitalism, a comprehensive explanation of how the system works, and the necessity for a socialist alternative.

Robert Tressell speaks through

the 'hero' Owen, a building worker, describing incidents and characters that any worker could relate to today. The "philanthropists" are the workers willing to work for the "good cause" of giving their unpaid labour to the "masters" - the bosses' profits.

Casualisation, bullying bosses, low pay, poor housing, debt, unemployment, and the regular humiliations endured by working people throughout their lives, are all graphically depicted by Robert. The overwhelming impression is of a book written by, not just a well placed observer, but as Noonan puts it "the story of twelve months in Hell told by one of the damned".

Explanation

Robert wrote his novel between 1905 and 1908 but despaired of having it printed as publisher after publisher rejected the manuscript. After Robert's death his daughter Kathleen managed to sell the manuscript, for £25, to its first publisher, Grant Richards, who described it thus: "the book was damnably subversive but it was extremely real".

Unfortunately in the first edition, in 1914, and in subsequent editions, the novel was much hacked about and shortened, and given a depressing ending with Owen contemplating the killing of his family and his own suicide! Fred C Ball, Robert Noonan's biographer, tracked down the original manuscript and eventually, in 1955, the first unabridged edition came off the presses and with Robert's uplifting final chapter restored.

Throughout the novel are various episodes where Owen explains the real workings of capitalism to his workmates and argues the need for socialism. These explanations are

not 'forced'. The writer's skills make these scenes feel natural and as parts of a seamless whole. The Money Trick, chapter 21, gives a lucid and as straightforward introduction to marxist economics as any and made memorable by its humorous treatment and realistic portrayal of the behaviour of the characters involved.

One charge sometimes laid against the book is of being biased to men and their workplaces, that the women receive a lesser treatment. But as early as chapter three Tressell shows Ruth Easton as being more able than her husband in managing the household budget - a greater insight of the economics of capitalism which enables them to survive.

In chapter six it is Nora Owen, in conversation with her young son, who from a socialist perspective describes capitalism and the problems to be overcome in changing it.

The Philanthropists lack feelings of class solidarity and the novel is hazy about how they may attain class consciousness to forward the struggle for socialism. Occasionally the idea of the impoverished masses driven by their wretched conditions to overthrow the capitalists in a bloody uprising is proffered, at others an appeal to "reason", to vote for revolutionary socialists.

Owen's 'lectures' of course mirror the socialism of his day, a convincing analysis of capitalism coupled to the drawing of a wonderful vision of a socialist future, but somewhat vague as regards the transition between.

Only months after Robert Noonan's death, Liverpool was in the grip of a general strike. 80,000 workers fought police and soldiers in the August demonstration known as "Bloody Sunday".

The journalist Gibbs reported that the strike was "...as near to revolution as anything seen in England." Only those carts and goods could move freely that had permits from the strike committee. Posters and leaflets declaiming "Socialism is the answer to Capitalism" went up in the city.

In the following local elections, Labour representation gained a successful foothold in a city where politics had been deeply marked by religious sectarianism.

But for Noonan's tragic and untimely death, and given his powers of observation and description, a worthy sequel to the Philanthropists may have been written - depicting working people awakened by great events, realising their capability to challenge the "masters" and to change society.

Socialist Books

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists
Robert Tressell

£10 including postage from:
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