

the Socialist postbag

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Haunted by Liverpool

At a recent Birmingham city council budget 'consultation' meeting, the council had already decided on the size of the cuts. They just wanted to run their proposals past the public and perhaps consider alternative cuts! The chief executive explained the council's legal obligation to set a balanced budget (forgetting to mention that the council can use reserves and borrow against income) and explained the chaos after Liverpool council refused to set a rate in 1986. He didn't say that it wasn't only Liverpool that refused to set a rate or explain that the forerunners of the Socialist Party, who were very influential in Liverpool council at the time, favoured setting a needs budget rather than refusing to set a rate. And the successful 1984 campaign that secured an extra £60 million from the government was also mysteriously forgotten.

Council officials know what strategy is likely to lead to government concessions, ie that advocated by the Socialist Party, of councils setting a needs budget, backed up by a lively public campaign and industrial action. But the spectre of Liverpool still haunts local government chief executives, so they had to lie about what really happened.

Clive Walder, Birmingham

Strictly come means testing

For working class people, the 1930s are synonymous with unbearable poverty and struggle. But it seems some people look to that period for inspiration. Speaking at a Radio5Live forum on poverty and food banks, former Tory MP Edwina Currie expressed utter disbelief at the idea that people are struggling to survive.

In a style reminiscent of the 1930s

means test, she challenged every claim of suffering and poverty. People who claimed to not have adequate food were accused of wasting money on mobile phones, cigarettes and lottery tickets. When she visited a single unemployed mother's home she looked around the house for every sign that this woman might not be suffering sufficiently. Unsurprisingly, callers to the show were spitting with rage. But Currie and the Tories should remember that in Birkenhead and other areas working class people rose up in the 1930s and kicked out the means test. And N30 will be the start of a campaign to kick out the Con-Dems and all their mean cuts.

Susan Harper

Anti-banker Ospreys?

Wealthy bankers are not popular and not only socialists notice that fact. Welsh regional rugby team 'the Ospreys' have tried to distance themselves from bankers to relate more to their working class supporters.

They banned their players from using spray-on tans, a fashion statement beloved of their former player, Gavin Henson. An Ospreys spokesperson told the local press "This region represents the steelworks, BOC in Margam, the roadsweepers. It doesn't represent the banks, it doesn't represent city slickers... generally your working class man doesn't go to spray parlours and spray himself to go to work."

The Ospreys know where their bread and butter comes from and picked up on the mood of working class people. However, the spokesperson also admitted: "Our players get paid more than people in those industries (the working class) but our values are the same." I'm an Ospreys supporter. It would be nice to think the players will march and rally with us on 30 November. Probably not though to be honest!

Dave Warren, Llanelli

Humanitarian business

The Guardian reported (14 November) that former 'soldier of fortune', ie hired gun Tony Buckingham, who now owns an oil company, is seeking the help of a would-be Tory MP to get a foothold in Libya for his business now that Gaddafi has been overthrown. So that's what the 'humanitarian' action was all about.

Colin Walker

Clean energy

The International Energy Agency says that a massive switch to clean energy production is needed by 2017. Otherwise, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will be sufficient to cause a two degrees centigrade increase in global temperatures, resulting in catastrophic climate change. However, the IEA's top economist, Fatih Birol, says there's little sign of governments taking the needed action.

A recent indication of where capitalist governments' loyalty lies was the invasion of Libya. This was not for humanitarian reasons but for the profits of oil companies - just like the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

We need a serious attitude to climate change, which means developing the available technology to replace all carbon and nuclear energy production with renewable energy. We need democratic socialist planning based on the needs of people, not profit.

Jeff Allen, Loughton

Cuts kill

Poverty, despair and a suicide pact

Cuts to public services and benefits are causing massive suffering and misery. Tragically, the bodies of a vulnerable couple, Mark and Helen Mullins, were found in their Warwickshire home this month. Mark, an army veteran, and Helen, who suffered from learning difficulties, died in what is seen as a 'suicide pact'.

The couple feared being too poor to live through another freezing winter on the poverty line on £57.50 a week benefits. Every Sunday they had walked to a soup kitchen 12 miles away in Coventry to have something to eat and pick up food bags after Mrs Mullins' benefits were stopped 18 months ago.

They boiled free vegetables from the soup kitchen into a broth on a camping stove and lived in just one room of their terraced house to save on heating costs.

Social services are understood to have taken away Helen's 12 year-old daughter last year as she was considered incapable of looking after her. As a result, her child benefits stopped but she was ineligible to claim Jobseeker's Allowance because she was not deemed fit to work.

Helen was also told she did not qualify for incapacity benefit because she had not been officially diagnosed with a medical condition. Mark Mullins, his wife's full-time carer, was told he could not claim for a carer's allowance until she was diagnosed with a disorder.

Speaking in a documentary about the soup kitchen last December Mr Mullins said: "We were caught in a Catch 22 situation. We were living hand to mouth. I think the system is



Mark and Helen Mullins

very unkind."

A social worker commented: "They were trying to do the right thing ... the right way, and it seems like every corner they turned, they met a different obstacle."

A nurse who specialises in psychiatric care commented: "This sad and shocking story is a damning indictment of the Con-Dems and their 'big society', a condemnation of the cuts and the glaring lack of adequate community care resources."

It happened because learning difficulties (LD) community teams are under-resourced and have a very high threshold for accepting anyone onto their books. A person's IQ has to be measured as being below 70, so many disabled people fall through the net.

If you are not under a specialist team like mental health or learning

difficulties it would be very hard to argue successfully for getting 'disability benefits' unless you are extremely clever or have a good lawyer or other good independent representation.

The benefits system is very complex to navigate. A couple like this should have had a professional person involved, ie a community LD nurse/social worker to link them into their local Jobcentre-plus.

Mrs Mullins would then have secured her benefits or got them reinstated quickly or got a crisis loan.

Primary care, ie GP's surgeries, just don't have the time or resources to support such vulnerable people. With no family or friends, they were basically left without any support at all and this tragic loss of life occurred."

Poppy mania for bosses...

Sue Powell

To cheers from the press, David Cameron and Prince William intervened so the England football team could wear the poppy during their match against Spain. Channel 4 broadcaster Jon Snow, criticised for not wearing one, said: "There is a rather unpleasant breed of poppy fascism out there - 'he damned well must wear a poppy!'"

For my generation, the world was left a big impression. In our street there was a bombsite where we'd play, people still lived in prefab emergency housing, several skeletal houses stood as they'd done since the Blitz.

My grandparents were bombed out. Sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews had died in two world wars. One granddad lied about his age, to volunteer in World War One at 16. He never talked about the war. After being bullied by "patriotic" older workmates, my other granddad died, leaving my nan to bring up four kids. Dad was a fireman in the Blitz.

So although we'd stand in silence on Armistice Day, there wasn't much respect for establishment warmongers. "Remembrance" recalled suffering not glory and the red poppy honoured those slaughtered for nothing on "Flanders' fields".

When I was young it was commonplace to view WWI as an horrif-



Wilfred Owen

ic waste of life. This war was waged by declining empires. It not only destroyed a generation but was a cause of World War Two and further horrors.

Many of my grandparents' generation were duped into fighting for "king and country". Everywhere most workers' leaders echoed the patriotic call. Yet older people have told me that there never used to be so much fuss made about the military between the wars as there is now - and I can't recall it post-war.

The huge anti-war protests over the Gulf war, the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq shook the "establishment" to the core and they have been gradually glorifying war ever since, aided by Help for Heroes.

Weeks before 11 November there appears to be an epidemic of red poppies on TV - especially on the BBC. For the first time in over 40 years, I stood to the national anthem at a match recently - caving in to peer pressure from 11,000 fans and a stadium announcer saying "and now our boys from xx regiment back from Afghanistan".

I do not want to be "ruled over" and I am against the military misadventures of this government. I'm with Harry Patch - one of the last WWI veterans - who mourned his comrades and wore his poppy, saying "war is organised murder."

And the words of WWI poet, Wilfred Owen, about a man gassed in the trenches, which ends:

"If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori"

(It is sweet and glorious to die for one's country)

I learned that at school but I have a feeling it's not in the national curriculum now.

...but poverty for ex-soldiers

Most ex-soldiers - especially people like Mark Mullins (see article above) - have gained nothing from the recent media poppyfest. 2,500 ex-servicemen are in

prison, there are 1,100 single homeless ex-servicemen and 2,500 in statutorily homeless families' accommodation in London alone. Now army recruiters are

touring homeless hostels to recruit - they recently took 22 homeless young people in Leeds on a promotional day out!