PAY US A LIVING WAGE NOW!

A local government worker, Yorkshire

The Low Pay Commission has just recommended a 3% increase in the minimum wage from 1 October. This is a pathetic 19p an hour or a loaf of bread more on an eight-hour shift or a pack of nappies more for a 40-hour week.

This is an insult to the families who over the last five years have seen the cost of the weekly food bill rocket by 24%, energy costs by 39%, public transport by 30% and social housing rents by 26% on average.

Even worse, young workers aged 18-20 stand to get only a 2% increase, taking their hourly wage to £5.13 - for 16-17 year olds the hourly wage will be £3.79.

With payday loans and food banks now a way of life for families up and down the country the gap between the end of the wages and the end of the month is now weeks rather than days. Parents are skipping meals to make food go round. Rising numbers of children are going to school without breakfast.

This not only causes suffering now but malnourishment is storing up health problems for the future.

This pitiful increase, the first above inflation rise since the start of the financial crisis in 2008, is an insult to these families and the army of working poor without full-time opportunities, permanent contracts or decent terms and conditions

Meanwhile those of us working in local government on poverty wages as catering staff, cleaners, teaching assistants and librarians see our unions stalling on pushing our pay claim.

Our union leadership have the laughable hope that this rise in the minimum wage will take the pressure off our stretched budgets and spiralling costs of living. We need to ballot now for strike action to win our pay claim and we should strike with the teachers on 26 March.

We all know only too well that neither this government nor, it is patently clear, the next, will give anything away to us without a fight.

The TUC, rather than just welcoming this increase, should be mobilising the unions for a coordinated fight, including general strike action, against poverty and cuts.

We need to be able to fight for decent living standards for ourselves and our families. We should declare war on this millionaire government and build a new mass party for the millions.

The Socialist Party says:

- Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to the ‘living wage’ rate of £7.65 an hour or £8.80 in London, as an immediate step towards £10 an hour for all
- 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 for all
- Reject ‘workfare’ and end zero-hour contracts. For the right to decent benefits, education, training, or a job, without compulsion
- Share out the work. A maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay

Donate to the Socialist Party’s congress financial appeal!

We are appealing to all our members and supporters to donate to the Socialist Party’s Congress 2014 fighting fund appeal. Hundreds of Socialist Party members will be coming together from every corner of England and Wales to discuss the latest political developments in Britain and worldwide. We need the resources to meet all the challenges ahead and to maintain our ability to offer people an anti-austerity alternative. Can you help? Can you make a donation of £5, £10, £50 or £100 or more?

Every donation makes a difference and we can promise that every penny will go towards building support for socialist ideas. Phone 020 8988 8762 to make a donation or visit socialistparty.org.uk.
Dear reader,

I am writing to express my concern about the recent events in Ukraine and the consequences of those events for the wider region and the international community.

The events in Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine have led to significant disruptions and suffering, not only for the individuals directly affected but for the wider region as well. The international community has a responsibility to ensure that these events are addressed in a peaceful and constructive manner.

I believe that the international community should engage in dialogue with all parties involved to find a peaceful solution to the current conflict. This dialogue should be based on respect for international law and the principles of sovereignty and self-determination.

I urge all parties to engage in good faith negotiations and to refrain from actions that could escalate the conflict.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
Tony Health Minister Jeremy Hunt's decision to dissolve Mid Staffs Health Trust has taken a long time - but it comes as no shock. The announcement has probably been timed to aid the government's plan to speed up the provision of rich pickings for the private vultures circling the NHS.

After campaigners' court victory against the closure of Grantham Hospital's A&E, the government is using the announcement about Mid Staffs to take up all the old discredited media attacks on health workers. This is designed as a smokescreen to help rush an amendment to the Care Bill through Parliament. Dubbed the 'Hospital Closure Clause', it passed, it will allow the fast-track closure or privatisation of hospitals in as little as 48 days.

But, despite NHS workers at Stafford being pillaged relentlessly by the mass media and political leaders of all three parties for their 'failures' at Stafford hospital, the responsibility for any failures is to be found elsewhere.

To become a Foundation Trust in 2005, Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust needed to comply with its 24 social targets set by the then Labour government. It had to 'overcome' a debt of £174m while still taking in more money on a private finance initiative (PFI) deal to build a new emergency wing. This was paid with 160 job losses in 2006 on top of the 100 that had already been cut. But this 'successful' outcome for the Labour government and financial rulers proved to be a disaster for patients.

It's clear that the government learned a valuable lesson from the

50,000 who marched in Stafford against the attacks on Stafford Hospital last April. Through their rapid movement, the government want to prevent this type of opposition from erupting on the streets again.

Lessons

Health trade unions and health campaigners also need to draw the necessary lessons from the Stafford march. Firstly, it confirmed that a massive accumulated anger exists at the attacks on the NHS by this and the previous Labour government.

Secondly, it also clearly demonstrated that a plan of action, drawn up by the health trade unions and local communities to carry out an organised campaign against the dismantling and privatisation of the NHS, including strike action if necessary, would receive the support of millions across Britain.

It would have the potential to stop the privatisation juggernaut in its tracks and herald the end of this government even before the next general election. It would also be a warning to any incoming government to keep their hands off the NHS.

50,000 marched to save Stafford Hospital in April 2013

Fat Dons

While universities teaching and supporting staff have seen their pay steadily eroded, the leaders of all three parties for their 'successes' at Stafford, the attacks on the NHS by this and the previous Labour government. The Con-Dem government has even claimed food poverty. The government's own advisers have pointed out that the increasing cost of living is the main driving force behind the increase in demand for food banks. The government is therefore facing a double whammy by having to fork out even more cash to provide full services.

No defence

The Con-Dem funding cuts in food relief has resulted in at least £1 billion of damage to homes, shops and infrastructure in the worst winter in England for over 250 years. Even the government's own advisers have warned that a £500 million under-spend will mean £3 billion of avoidable damage.

New research published in Nature Climate Change says the increasing frequency of extreme weather events due to global warming - and also socio-economic factors such as developers building on flood plains, etc. - will see the annual economic cost rise from around £43 billion a year across the European Union today to a staggering £23 billion a year by 2050 without better flood protection.

...& Us

Have you got news for the ‘fishes’? Email: editors@socialistparty.org.uk

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Fight the government’s vicious sanctions regime

Ian Pattison
Youth Fight for Jobs

Experiencing the daily grind of poverty and fruitless job searches when you’re out of work is very demoralising. But the Con-Dem government has gone the extra mile. They’re hell-bent on making life as difficult as possible for those who are out of work.

They have seen the media has been awash with stories about the severity of benefit sanctions. The link between benefit sanctions and extreme poverty featured heavily in BBC’s Panorama documentary, ‘Hungry Britain?’, on the spread of food banks across the country.

According to Panorama, a record high number of people, 875,000, had their benefits withdrawn through sanctions over the last year. Demonstrating the depths of cold cruelty that Con-Dem policy can sink to, 130,000 of these were overturned on appeal. This outrageous figure would be even higher if more people appealed.

Many people have their benefits withdrawn for devastatingly long periods of time for what even the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) deems ‘minor offences’. One family had their benefits cut entirely following a ‘clerical mix-up’, a mistake by DWP!

The DWP peddles innocence and claims there are no targets for sanctioning people on benefits. But PCS members working in jobcentres know that sanctions targets do exist. Jobcentre workers are pressured to meet ‘management estimates’ on benefit sanctions. Panorama featured one jobcentre in Grantham adorned with a wall chart showing the savings made from imposing severe benefit sanctions.

Jobseeker’s Allowance recipients are by no means the only people to suffer from sanctions. Victims of the hated ‘bedroom tax’ have been told to find a lodger or more paid work to cover the penalties imposed on their ‘spare room’, without knowing this can affect their eligibility for housing benefit.

Benefit sanctions, even those provoked by mistakes by DWP, leave unemployed people with, at best, an emergency payment, but in some circumstances, nothing. Out of touch former ‘ Thatcherite Tory minister, Edwina Currie, says there is no need for food banks and no such thing as food poverty. Scandalously, Ian Duncan Smith has even claimed food banks contribute to ‘entitlement culture’, putting the blame for the devastatingly rapid expansion of food banks anywhere but at the doorstep of his government.

They’re even more out of touch than we previously thought when they claim ‘there is no link between their welfare cuts and the rise of food banks.’

The Con-Dem government should no longer be confident it can rely on public antipathy when attacking people on benefits. There is only so far they can push us, before we snap back!
Determined Doncaster care workers in 7-day strike

A Unison member

What’s the point of New Labour? That’s the question being asked by many working class people in Wales particularly after all eleven Labour- led councils have voted for, or are in the process of voting through, vicious cuts to local authority jobs and services.

Labour councillors claim ‘there's nothing we can do’ but these cuts, if implemented, will transfer local authorities from providers to pursuers of privatised and reduced services in a few years. The lie behind this is that nothing La- bour councillors can do was put to rest when the Carmarthenshire county Union branch produced and submitted a no-cuts budget. Our branch called on Labour coun- cillors to implement it and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Unison members. This included cleaners, trade unions, anti-cuts groups and the wider community and to build re- sistance to the cuts.

We called on councillors to build a mass campaign of resistance link- ing up with the other ten Labour councils in Wales to fight the cuts. We received no formal, or even in- formal, response from the Labour leadership of the council.

The full council meeting on 19 February exposed the degeneracy of the Labour Party and how far it has come from being a party that in- terests of working class people. La- bour councillors were conspicuous by their absence from the debate. In voting through Con-Dem cuts, they put their own self-interest and their political careers before council ser- vices they were elected to provide. Councillors prefer to hide behind council officers. But in the case of Carmarthenshire the audit office in Wales has already ruled that their ad- vice was unlawful on two occasions!

The Labour-led council, in coal- ition with Independents (Tories in all but name) also voted to end trade union secondments. This is clearly a political decision by Labour and independent councillors attempt- ing to stifle their branch fighting their cuts and representing our members’ interests.

Some Labour councillors have proudly told us they were ex-NUM members. It seems that it was right then to fight to keep the pits open but it’s not okay to fight to keep local government services now.

Watching the budget debate in Carmarthenshire council - the passivity of the Labour council- lours and the lack of fight when they all voted for cuts - you could only draw one conclusion. We need a new mass workers’ party.

Leeds council workers discuss cuts fightback

A Leeds council steward

On 4 February Leeds Unison branch held an all-stewards meeting in response to the package of proposals. We had also teamed up with the GMB and Unite for an activists’ meeting on 4 and 5 March in their battle for the same sick pay, holidays and end of days. Outsourced cleaners working at SOAS college in London were on strike on 4 and 5 March in their battle for the same sick pay, holidays and pensions as staff employed directly by this part of London University. Through previous strikes the workers have won the London Living Wage and trade union recognition. (Another US experience)

Train drivers vote for action at Northern Rail

Craig Johnson, RMT Relief Regional Organiser North, spoke to the Socialist

Depot drivers who are in the RMT at Heaton Depot, Newcastle and Nev- dille Hill Depot, Leeds, working for Northern Rail, have voted by a mas- sive majority, for strike action. This is because the company’s policy cannot be to recognise properly the tasks and skills that they have to perform with the various different types of trains they operate.

We’re demanding a fair grading and pay structure for them. They do a crucial job when it comes to Northern Rail’s operations, shown by the fact that the company have imported a whole team of managers to try and undermine this effective action.

Once again with railway man- agement we see hurried training schemes and the undermining of the safety culture in an attempt to beat the action – it never works but it exposes its tactics.

I’ve heard reports that they are putting these scab managers up in top hotels with no expense spared. So they can find the money for some things.

Northern Rail, which is a shoddy joint venture between Serco (re- cently exposed in the security tag scandal) and Abellio, the Dutch national railway, makes millions out of the rail privatisation scan- dal, while not recognising the hard work carrying out their responsibilities.

For more workplace and trade union news see: socialistparty.org.uk
Send us your reports to editors@socialistparty.org.uk

The care workers cannot afford the pay cuts they are being threatened with - photo Alistair Tice

where an epileptic person had a seizure because there weren’t any trained staff to administer his medi- cation and the paramedics had to be called. Make no mistake, these care- workers, mainly women, are very determined and were back protest- ing outside Care UK offices again the next day.
Government condemns millions to housing misery

Meanwhile fat cat landlords cream the cash

Paul Kershaw

S
ince the global financial crash of 2007-8 the lack of affordable housing has become increasingly acute for the '99%, particularly shaming the lives of young people and the poor with a relentless cruelty. That is true internationally, in Europe and the US as well as the UK. Through this housing disaster workers are being made to pay for the capitalists' crisis.

The number of households forced into the expensive and insecure private rented sector outpaced those in social housing (housing association and council housing) for the first time last year according to the 2014 English Housing survey. The same survey shows 9.3% of private rented homes suffer from damp.

Private rents have rocketed, forcing people into overcrowded conditions and making the prospect of saving enough for a deposit to buy a house even more remote. Average monthly rental costs across Britain are on track to climb above £1,000 this year, according to property firm 'Move With Us'.

Prices boom

In December, official figures showed that the average UK house price had for the first time risen above £250,000; about ten times median income and London house prices jumped 12.3% on average last year. The boom has broadened out beyond London, with prices in more than half the country for the first time in ten years, according to data from property researchers Hometrack. The government has given prices a deliberate boost through its cynically misnamed 'Help to Buy' initiative. Of course rising prices do not help people buy. In reality they want to boost house prices and please established home-owning Tory voters.

At the start of the world financial crash the housing bubble started to collapse. No wonder even bankers have condemned this policy, warning of a further bubble. House prices multiplied six times between 1983 and 2007 and land prices rose a startling 16 times in the same period, it is easy for landlords to make money doing nothing. This, rather than 'red tape' explains large 'land banks' where, despite planning permission, homes are not built.

Home ownership has fallen to its lowest level for 25 years and the English Housing survey shows that four in ten private renters see no prospect of ever owning a home. The Joseph Rowntree Trust estimates that the number of people in their 20s with a mortgage will halve in the next five years. In the past private renting in Britain was seen as a temporary stage with the dream of owning your own home at the end. That dream is now in ruins. Building council housing has all but ceased since the 1980s and the infamous Tory 'right to buy' scheme continues to reduce the stock. The number of relatively cheap, social rent homes has dropped by around a quarter in the last ten years.

In London, over 271,000 council homes have been sold off since 1980. More than a third of them are rented out by private landlords. Housing Associations are building, but with disappearing grants and higher rents. The new category of social 'affordable' rent may be cheaper than private renting but is actually often unaffordable; far more expensive than 'social rent'.

Rent controls

The distinction between housing associations and private landlords is collapsing as associations behave more like commercial corporations and private landlords can now access grant money. The new 'social arm' of Grainger, the UK's largest listed residential landlord, moved its first tenants into a developent in Beresford, Hampshire last month.

High rents charged by private landlords, combined with the growth of low pay explain the rising housing benefit bill. What a scandal that TV programmes such as Benefit Street try to direct the blame on tenants and benefit claimants. Even some Labour politicians are now touting with some form of rent control. David Lammy, seen as a possible future leader for London Mayor, says he is considering it. He is anxious to assure that he won't be thinking of the rent control introduced under the pressure of the workers' movement during World War One.

Perfectly accurately he points to Chancellor Angela Merkosi in Germany accepts the need for a form of rent control. He assures us he wouldn't want to interfere with landlords' profits and wants investigations before action. But the housing emergency is a result of profit oriented policies over decades.

The boom in private landlordism dates from the Thatcher government's 1988 housing act which cut security for private renters and removed rent control for new letts. That legislation is still on the statute books. The housing emergency should be addressed by immediately reintroducing rent control which would not need new primary legislation.

When rents were deregulated the Tory housing minister was challenged about the impact of rising rents; he did not deny rents would go up but said that housing benefit would 'take the strain' - in reality increased profits for landlords would come from benefit money. It is true that rent control alone would not solve the housing crisis; nationalising the banks and mobilising finance to build quality council housing to meet social need should follow.

Fundamentally, capitalism is the problem. All of the major parties support it. The Socialist Party and campaigners in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition have a key role in establishing an alternative.

The enormous gulf between the social classes in London widened further as recently published figures showed that average home prices surged by more than £8,000 last month to hit a record high of £409,881. The average London home went up in value by more than £40,000 in the year to January - around a third more than the average London salary - fuelled by overseas billioners buying up property portfolios thanks to the Con-Dems' liberal tax regime.

The average value of a house owned by a cabinet minister has soared by over £200,000 (12%) since the 2010 election. The Camerons' four-bedroom house in Notting Hill, bought for £1 million in 2006, is now worth an estimated £2 million. David Cameron rents it out for a cool £72,000 a year whereas an average family continues to live rent free in Downing Street. He also owns a property in his Oxfordshire constituency valued at £1.1 million. Welfare minister Iain Duncan Smith, who introduced the hated 'bedroom tax' last year, lives rent free in a £2 million Buckinghamshire mansion with four spare bedrooms.

An agent's sign is subverted in Clapham North, London

The Socialists campaigning for rent controls to curb rip-off landlords

An undercover investigation by the Daily Record into privately rented slum housing in Glasgow discovered 'tiny rooms with barred windows that look on to a rat-infested courtyard, and we found bladdered men left unconscious in filthy corridors'. Bellgrove Hotel owners, fat cats Ron Barr and Kenneth Gray, are creaming more than £1.5 million a year in housing benefit for such squalid accommodation.

Photo: S.Wrack

FEATURR5
International Women's Day

As more and more miners got arrested, the bail conditions were that they didn't go on picket lines or demos. So they swapped places and the men moved into the kitchen, a lot of them, and the women moved onto the picket lines.

Women who had never spoken to anybody but their own neighbours were actually invited to trade union meetings in Europe, the Soviet Union, South Africa and the US.

No going back

Written for the Socialist in 2004 for the 20th anniversary of the strike, Sue Albrey from Clifton, a North Derbyshire village which had had a dozen local pits, tells how the local Women's Action Group supported the miners.

Our group of miners’ wives and other local organised women got 300-400 food parcels every week and the end of the strike. The Parish Council set us an empty shop and elected us. We had the marching with a song run.

When we got involved to local pickets, there was no electricity or water to go into our strike centre, but we were given camping stoves, gas lamps, tables and chairs and 300-400 buckets a day. We started a two shift system - one week-long, one running from 6am to 6pm and the second for the miners in the village. I was placed at the front for the first bit of time and I had then switched to the second. I just thought, I don’t have to argue for women’s role in the strike. It was a tremendous time and a defeat, but it brought together a whole mass of people, particularly women. And they’ve never heard of it. We’ve heard it in our town.

The BBC did a film ten years ago and they use local people in the area - again, it’s their own. I mean, it’s not known in the province. We had our local shops, they would play my film. They’d never let you play programmes. I had to ask in the post office, I had to go to the parks and the public gardens. In the battle scene they had to keep stopping filming and making the film. The reality is, those areas, are so dusty, stopping them was a joke.

The Times called the involvement of the miners’ wives “boring in the female Eliza Doolittle at the time”. Why do you think that was?

Women getting involved in the strike changed their lives. Because it was their livelihoods, it was their own, it was our future.

Personally I’ve got involved when they sent the horses and the troops onto my street, in my town, terrified my mam to death so she daren’t go out the house. Police, these are actors, stop battering them. There was a glorious fightback by the working class wouldn’t have suffered the consequences.

Unemployment among women is now at its highest rate in 25 years. Almost three times as many women as men have become long-term unemployed. Over half of Britain’s working women are low paid. Women getting involved in the strike.

Unions have introduced general women’s (or workers’) committees. They were set up not just to talk, but to do. The Monday club would meet at a local pub with a collection at the door.

There was a famous miners’ wives’ picnic where the women contributed a two-shift system – one week-long, one running from 6am to 6pm and the second from 6pm to 6am. They spent the first week of the strike cooking meals for the miners crossing the picket line and had actually stopped to talk to them because “we were involved in the women’s strike”.

Sarah Wrack spoke to miners’ wives who ran a kitchen near Barnsley. In an interview with the Militant correspondent of the Socialist in 1984, they said:

 From picking out the miners we had had a job and a picket where we had been given a mattress and some provisions and services for the families. We had a tent at the picket – we visited the miners at the picket. Then we were invited to a meeting at British Rail and Oxford. A miners’ wife aged 53 has a visitation of Galt and we’ve also recorded

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Action against vicious council cuts

The Calderdale and Greater Huddersfield NHS Trust has announced a public ‘consultation’ on the future of its services and emergency provision in the area. They have put forward five proposals, most of which will see either Huddersfield or Calderdale A&E closed, although one of the more ‘radical’ ideas is to shut them both!

The combined population of the Calderdale and Greater Huddersfield NHS Trust is approximately 750,000 and there is absolutely no way one A&E department can service everyone. This will be a matter of life and death for many critically ill patients.

Anticipating the announcement, activists have been mobilising to defeat the proposed cuts. Preparatory meetings at the beginning of the year meant we were able to draw local trade unionists and community activists into the lobby on the day of the budget setting.

In 2013 three labour councillors in Hull were prepared to stand up and vote against cuts. This year only Gill Kennett voted against the cuts budget. Hull council’s cuts are not only being driven from the public purse but by the public when they voted in a Labour administration reliant on Lib Dem votes.

If the strategy of targeting councilors to claim that Labour is being soft is to succeed, then Gary Waring and others must prepare to lose his seat.

Yet a very vocal and colourful lobby of the county council’s budget meeting on 25 February resulted in two major climb-downs from the council, which is run by various so-called ‘independent’ councillors. A campaign by parents and teachers to save additional learning needs (ALN) units in the county’s schools has developed into a broader ‘Powys Uncut’ campaign taking as its starting-point opposition to all cuts.

One mother at the lobby movingly described her autistic daughter, who is unable to speak, had relocated in the unit at brand new Golwg Y Cym school in Machynlleth.

Protesters opposed cuts to the schools’ literacy, numeracy, special needs, day centres and home care for elderly and disabled people. The Socialist Party’s bilingual leaflets and placards were well-received. The council backtracked on two of its flagship cuts – the ALN units are to stay, and the six fixed-increase charges for using day centres has been dropped.

The council failed to agree its budget, and was adjourned for a week. It’s clear that the bulk of the £20 million cuts will go ahead - the struggle to save our services has just begun!

Kate Jones

West Sussex

On 14 February councillors gathered at West Sussex county council to vote on whether to approve more brutal cuts. More than 500 disaffected and angry people and their carers gathered outside county hall waving banners calling on the council to stop the cuts.

As the debate began the public gallery erupted and the chair of the Don’t Cut Us Out anti-cuts group stood to address the council. The police then proceeded to ket-shell the gallery, photographed and filmed by the police. The police then proceeded to ket-shell the gallery, photographed and filmed by the police. Pete Watson

People ready to defend A&Es

Hull

It came as no surprise to campaigners and trade unionists in Hull that the Labour council passed a budget which means cuts of £48 million to services over the next two years, with a loss of up to 500 jobs. Labour has a record of more cuts than any other local council in the country.

Love, a rollercoaster for the council workforce. Trade union members were balloted for strike action three times over changes to terms and conditions while the threat of job losses was ever present. In the end, the threat of strike action by the local authority unions forced the council to reduce its plans.

This process was well ahead of the nerves of many workers who understandably just want the whole horrific situation to go away. Despite this, up to 200 trade unionists and community activists took part in the lobby on the day of the budget setting.

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Nottinghamshire

Nottinghamshire Unison and campaign groups lobbed the Labour-controlled council’s budget setting. Over £100 million of cuts over two years were agreed. Nottinghamshire Unison adopted a policy last September of requesting a full review of spending with a view to setting one or two years’ budget based on using reserves and borrowing aged against next year’s income. This was seen as a ‘stop gap’ to build a campaign against the council’s huge loss of central government budget cuts. This review was never done.

In the end the council backtracked on some proposals – the Aspersian team, welfare rights advisors and community café were saved, for example.

But more cuts are to follow. Nottinghamshire Unison spoke to council leaders, we wrote to every Labour councillor on budget day appealing for them not to vote for cuts. But not one voted against.

Isn’t it about time that Unison’s new leadership and council leaders who stood by local union policy.

Pete Waterson

Oppose the EDL in Worcester

The far-right, racist English Defence League is planning a rally in Worcestershire on 22 March. There will be a counter-mobilisation.

Anti-racists are to meet at 12 noon, the Gullhill, Worcester. The job now is to get trade union branches, anti-racist groups and community organisations to mobilise the majority who oppose racism. We must show how the capitalist parties’ support for cuts, job losses and lower living standards provides the soil for racism to grow.

Peter McAloney
Northern Ireland executive rocked by on the runs' crisis

Michael Cleary
Socialist Party Belfast

The past continues to haunt the present in Northern Ireland. In the last week of February a major crisis rocked the Northern Ireland Executive and almost brought it crashing down. The crisis erupted when charges against John Downey, a republican suspected of carrying out the Hyde Park bombing in London in 1982 which killed four soldiers, were dropped. It had emerged that Downey had received a letter assuring him that he was not wanted by the authorities and it quickly became clear that 200 or so other individuals had received similar letters. Men and women such as Downey were said to be ‘on the run’ during the Troubles when they left their homes in fear of arrest and moved between ‘safe houses’. Many operated in this way for decades, often ending up outside the North, residing in the South of Ireland or the United States.

The freedom for the ‘on the runs’ (OTRs) to return home and live free from the fear of arrest was a key issue for Sinn Féin during negotiations with the Blair government a decade ago. Attempts to pass legislation at Westminster to solve the issue collapsed in 2008 and a side-deal was then done between Sinn Féin and the government. The letters were issued as a result of this deal. The ‘solution’ to Northern Ireland’s problems was proposed by Blair and world leaders as a blueprint for recommencing the national question. But the OTRs crisis shows once again that it represented a cover-up among party leaders desperate for power.

As soon as Downey walked freely a storm of protest erupted and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) First Minister Peter Robinson threatened to resign, claiming that he knew nothing about what he termed the “get out of jail free” letters. Robinson had revealed the Executive would have collapsed (the Executive is in effect a mandatory coalition government of the DUP, Sinn Féin, the nationalist SDLP, the second largest unionist party the UUP, and the right-wing Alliance Party which draws support from both Catholics and Protestants) if the Assembly election would have followed. Immediately after it was announced that Downey Robinson dropped his threat to resign, claiming that a promised British government inquiry meant that the letters were now “useless pieces of paper”.

The immediate crisis has been defused but further shocks are inevitable, on the issue of the OTRs and on other issues, many relating to controversial events from the past.

Flag protests 2012

40 years. The DUP are clearly open to attack from Jim Allister of the Traditional Unionist Voice (a hard line split from the DUP which is opposed to unionists sharing power with Sinn Féin), and his like.

While the actual letters were issued in secret it was evident that the OTRs have been allowed to return quietly home and are often living openly.

All the evidence is that the DUP knew this and that Robinson’s climber was an attempt to hide this reality. The DUP is very concerned to be seen as on the side of the victims of the Troubles and fears losing votes if there is any hint that they are not.

There is real anger in the Protestant community on the issue of the OTRs. Many are incensed by what appears to be double-standards on the part of the British government - in their eyes suspected republican paramilitaries are granted an amnesty while loyalists continue to be pursued and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is examining whether charges can be brought against the soldiers who opened fire on Bloody Sunday.

Fractious atmosphere

The OTR crisis has to be seen against the background of a fractious atmosphere around the Executive table over the last year. The main parties were never comfortable coalition partners but the most continuous protests and violence on the streets since the flag protests (over the regularity of the flying of the Union Flag at Belfast City Hall) erupted in early December 2012 clouded the atmosphere even further.

Last summer the DUP unilaterally withdrew from a plan for a peace centre at the site of the Maze Prison Long Kesh which had previously been agreed with Sinn Féin. Tension was high at the time, in part because of a Sinn Féin backed march to commemorate dead IRA members which went through the centre of Castlereagh, a town which suffered many deaths during the course of the Troubles.

In an attempt to reach cross-party agreement, the DUP and Sinn Féin convened talks between all the main parties, chaired by US diplomat Richard Haass, on issues around flags, emblems, parades and the past. The talks concluded in the last days of 2013, and ended in spectacular failure. The OTRs crisis has only served to accentuate existing divisions.

Key players in the 2007 talks

Day-to-day politics in Northern Ireland is often dominated by issues concerning ‘the past’ and the rights of ‘the victims and survivors’ of the Troubles. The victims of the Troubles are those who suffered directly, that is, the thousands who died, the sons of those who were injured, and their families.

In a real sense all those who lived through the nightmare are victims, especially working class people who endured the worst of the violence. There are heartfelt calls from all quarters for ‘justice’ for ‘the victims’ and these should be listened to.

The obvious problem however, is that there is a bitter argument over what justice amounts to and exactly who deserves to be termed a victim. The plain truth is that many people will never have their pleas answered to their full satisfactions.

The workers’ movement must also expose the crimes of the state - the establishment must not be allowed to avoid responsibility for the violence of state forces. Learning the necessary lessons of the past would be a fitting memorial for those who died.

A real examination of the events of the last 40 years would lay bare, for the lie that it is, the poisonous idea that we are all somehow to blame for the Troubles. The workers’ movement has a duty to expose the crimes of the political forces which whipped up sectarianism in the past, and often continue to do so, even while they call for justice for the victims.

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**Letter of protest to the BBC**

On 25 February the BBC’s 6pm news bulletin referred to Militant, the Socialist Party’s predecessor, in its item on PIE. **Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary and former editor of Militant** sent the following letter:

“In an item on the Paedophile Information Exchange’s links with the National Council for Civil Liberties, you quoted Christian Wolmar, who said: ‘PIE very deliberately targeted libertarian left groups who might be fighting for anything from abortion rights to Northern Ireland, so that they gave themselves legitimacy. This was the same tactic, indeed as Militant or some other political groups like that, trying to get inside and presenting themselves as respectable.’

‘We object strongly to the implication that supporting the ideas of the Militant newspaper are as regressive as paedophilia. Further, Christian argues that Militant supporters were equivalent to ‘get inside’ other political campaigns in order to present themselves as respectable. We completely refute the suggestion that Militant supporters ever hid their ideas to gain ‘respectability’ – the fact that the newspaper was able to gain such prominence is a testament to that.

Militant supporting MPs and councillors very clearly set out their ideas in numerous speeches, as well as the leading role Militant supporters played in the Liverpool council of 1983-87, and in the battle against the phoney ‘mule’ contract that gave a member of the party that set up the NHS does not oppose the government for handing out that contract. ‘You can feel sick as I hate seeing public services being sold off. Kane replied: ‘We can’t afford the government for handing out that contract’.

So a member of the party that set up the NHS does not oppose the private sector making money off patients’ needs. The evening was broadcast, and the article calling on the unions to break the link with Labour. ‘All the panel other than Maguire endorsed the individualised membership recommended in the Colburn report and refused to defend unions’ right to have a collective voice in the party. Most trade unionists present were angry at this. When I spoke I had said I’d have a period of unemployment, even though I was promised that university would open the door to success. Under Labour, there was a push towards getting people into higher education, but there are not enough jobs, 40% of graduates are now unemployed six months after graduating, and an average of 80 people apply for every graduate job. I asked what a Labour government would do about this. A Labour councillor said they would guarantee two years of unemployment, but I defy anyone to live on £55 a week for two years. The audience were angry at Atos for making millions from taxpayers by judging people’s capacity for work. The panellists tried to join in on their ATOS-hating. But under the last Labour government Atos earned substantial sums of money, including a £300 million contract from NHS Scotland.

After the meeting I talked to Michael Kane that I had seen an ambulance from NHS Scotland.

We were pleased to note that the second sentence of the article quoted was right to a fault in the 10 o’clock bulletin, after complaints from Socialist Party members and others. This is a partial admission of error in the article quoted in the first instance.

However, this comparison is a step in the right direction, challenged on the 6 o’clock bulletin, watched by several million people. We are looking for a full apology where it is due.’

We request that you issue an apology and correction on a subsequent bulletin. The time taken for writing available on BBC iPlayer.

We reiterate these arguments, and we ask you to further point out the full extent of the Government’s culpability in the situation. We also urge you to make an apology and correction for the adverse remarks made about Militant in the first instance.”

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**Book review: Nigeria’s battle for a mass workers’ party**

Over the weekend of 1-2 March, 74 people were killed in a terror bombing by Boko Haram insurgents in Africa’s most populous country, Nigeria. Naomi Byron here reviews a new book that sheds light on Nigeria’s history of struggle and on what is needed to bring an end to terror and poverty there.

T he Socialist Party’s sister organisation in Nigeria, the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), has written a significant book on the struggle for a mass workers’ party. It is an object lesson in how to fight for workers’ representation and a socialist alternative.

The book DSM and the Struggle for a Working People’s Political Alternative republishes articles, manifestos and leaflets written over 26 years. Opening with an impassioned call for a party of labour in 1987, it shows how this demand was applied thru all the trials and terrors of dictatorship, through repeated take “transitions to democracy”, annulled elections, rising wage-passivity, nine general strikes and trade union leaders who cannot be trusted.

Highlights include the Nigerian comrades’ approach to the Nigerian Conscience Party (NCP) in the 2003 and 2007 elections. The NCP was never a socialist party, but its pro-“abolition of poverty” was reflected in the 2003 general election. Despite only winning registration in December 2002, four months before the election, the NCP came fifth nationally and third in Lagos state.

Yet in the 2007 elections the DSM called for a boycott. DSM member Laore Angwudede, who was democratically selected as NCP candidate for governor in Lagos, was subsequently replaced by an unknown candidate from the USA who wasn’t even a member of the NCP by the national leadership who had been taken over by careerist pro-capitalist elements.

This imposed candidate was accepted by the Nigerian state, despite the fact of fighting against austerity, actions of Militant supporters, and the struggle for a working class party. DSM and the Struggle for a Working People’s Political Alternative. A Democratic Socialist Movement (Nigeria) book. Special offer for readers of the Socialist.: £10 per copy or 3 for £25.

DSM and the Struggle for a Working People’s Alternative
Edited by Segun Sango
DSM and the struggle for a working people’s political alternative. A Democratic Socialist Movement (Nigeria) book. Special offer for readers of the Socialist.: £10 per copy or 3 for £25.

Union question time - Labour has no answers

James Evans

I went to a recent Communication Worker’s Union Question Time in Manchester. On the panel included Michael Kane, newly elected Labour MP for Wythenshawe and Kevin Maguire from ‘The Mirror’ who had written an article calling on the unions to break the link with Labour.

The panellists tried to join in the debate on zero-hour contracts. Later we discussed plans to move the movement forward, including regular youth meetings, stalls, and asking to speak at union branches about our experience of organising young workers.

Michael Kane MP

On 1 March Socialist Party and Youth Fight for Jobs campaigners protested against zero-hour contracts, low pay and poor working conditions in Croydon. Our chants, placards and leaflets encouraged young workers to join unions and fight for better employment conditions.

We were pleased to note that the Croydon Outlet Store - notorious for its low wages, bullying managers and crass anti-union attitude. Although we were standing outside the shop on a public road, bullying security guards aggressively demanded we leave and tried to take our placards. We naturally we continued to exercise our right to peacefully protest. These management stooges vio-

 laurence Maples

Fighting youth low pay and security bullies)
Police spying wrecks lives - end it!

Niall Mulholland

Well over 100 legal workers from the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, anti-racist campaigners, environmentalists, and trade unionists attended the Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance (COPS) public meeting in February.

The chair, Liz Davies, described how the campaign had come about following media revelations last year of police infiltration by the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), of anti-racists and environmentalists’ campaigns, Special Branch and building industry firms also conspired to secretly blacklist building worker trade unionists.

Despite the evidence of former police spies, no official investigation has been ordered by the government. Instead former police agent, Peter Francis, who went public last year on his role and who via his solicitor sent his support to the meeting, is being smeared by the police hierarchy.

Liz Davies told the packed meeting that COPS is calling for an independent, public inquiry, with powers to compel witnesses.

The solicitor, Imran Khan, read a statement to the meeting from Do-reen Lawrence, the mother of Stephen, who was killed in a racist attack in 1993.

Dave Smith spoke on behalf of the Special Branch Support Group, representing building workers who, on an ‘industrial scale’, were stopped from work.

A House of Lords Select Committee hearing on the matter found that Special Branch police met building industry representatives. A police agent confirmed that MIS and Special Branch shared files on building worker activists. Anti-racist campaigners were also targeted, even if they had not worked in construction.

One of the two defendants in the famous ‘McLibel’ case – in which McDonald’s sued them for libel – Helen Steel, told the meeting about the psychological abuse she suffered at the hands of police spying.

A regular feature of protests

Acting as an agent provocateur.

The last panel speaker was Lois Austin, former national chair of Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE), which police agent Peter Daley (real name, Peter Francis) infiltrated, as well as Militant (forerunner of the Socialist Party). In the 1980s, Lois explained, by targeting from Daley’s role, large police files are held on her and other anti-racists and socialists.

Lois called for COPS to be a broad umbrella campaign. A key demand is for an independent public inquiry – there can be no trust in the police investigating the police or another establishment-run ‘inquiry’ system.

Not just the police tops but also politicians should be investigated about their role, including former home secretaries, both under New Labour and the Tories.

see socialistsparty.org.uk for fuller version of this report

Support strike action against legal aid cuts

Action over Legal Aid cuts rocks the courts in January

Tanis Belsham-Wray

Police spying wrecks lives - end it!

Ahead of the 7 March strike by lawyers Russell Fraser, a young criminal barrister and joint secretary of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers (HS) spoke to Sarah Sachs-Eldridge about the implications of the cuts to justice and the plans to fight them.

Who will be affected by legal aid cuts?

For those in quality for civil legal aid, you must both be lawfully resident in the country and have lived in the country for at least 12 months. This means, for example, that if the young Yarwood detainers who’ve been allegedly sexually abused by some of the privately employed prison wardens there wanted to sue either Yarwood or the secretary of state, they wouldn’t be able to.

There’s also going to be a threshold introduced for criminal legal aid. Anyone with a disposable household income which is greater than £37,500 would not qualify for legal aid at all. If two people are earning it’s quite a low bar. Under that you have to make contributions towards any legal and litigation costs. Special Branch and building worker activists. Anti-racist and environmentalists’ campaigns were also targeted, even if they hadn’t worked in construction.

If two people are representing themselves or perhaps suffering domestic violence have to don’t take the cases to court at all. If two people are representing themselves or perhaps suffering domestic violence have to don’t take the cases to court at all.

What’s the effect on the legal profession?

People have been surprised to learn, as a result of the action, what we earn. A friend of mine, after working for a year or so self-employed, filled a tax return and had earned about £13,000 for the year. So we’re not actually rolling in money. People have to rely on overdrafts or preferats.

Things will be pushed back - it’s being people who’ve made a lot of money in a previous career or have wealthy parents who can come into law. Barristers don’t have pensions, maternity or paternity leave, we don’t have sickness pay. It’ll be increasingly difficult for women.

People from ethnic minority groups will be less likely to do the job. The likely disappearance of BME lawyers firms will have an impact on Black and Asian communities, people on their jobs, possibly alien, dominated as it is by rich, white men.

What’s behind the attack on legal aid for it. Very important cases may be affected. What’s the impact on the justice system if you’ve got money. The HS would always argue for legal aid to be extended, to be more available. Why anyone who’s accused of a crime should have to pay anything towards the defence of that they’ve been found guilty is completely bonkers to me. I think it should be free at the point of delivery, especially for criminal legal aid because what’s at stake is ultimately often the liberty of the individual.

Justice Minister Grayling is also attacking prisoners. He thinks prisoners don’t deserve legal aid - that they should go through the very institution that is treating them unfairly or unlawfully to have their complaint decided - it’s absolutely outrageous.

We always talk about legal aid as the fourth pillar of the welfare state and it’s being eroded. But where the government wants a lawyer there’s an open chequebook. Two QCs were paid £2 million between them last year.

What action is planned?

We had the half day in January - in essence a strike. It caused a lot of disruption. The government, of course, said that something like 75% of all courts were open - they weren’t operating to anything like full capacity.

The next date is 7 March. Again it’s combined with barristers and solicitors. Well over 100 legal workers from the Haldane has been campaigning for.

I appreciate that a lot of people were nervous about it. We’ve got professional obligations which can make it awkward.

There will be a demonstration outside parliament with people like Paddy Hill (Birmingham Six) and Shami Chakrabarti speaking. We’re then going to have a march from parliament to the Ministry of Justice.

Ian Lawrence, Napo general secretary, has supported us from day one and he’s also speaking on 7 March. The unions, PCS, Unite, etc, understand what’s going on better than most. In my view it’s unfortu-

nate that we’ve not been able to coordinate a date with them but it is extraordinary to see lawyers protesting in this way.

Sign the Justice Alliance petition here:


Support the next strike on 7 March

Justice under the knife

Support strike action against legal aid cuts
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What we stand for

The Socialist Party fights for socialism – a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profit of a few. We stand up every day to fight in our day-to-day campaigning for every possible improvement for working class people. The Socialist Party is the class base of the CWI, the international that organises in 45 countries.

Our demands include:

- Free education:
  - Full-time university tuition fees and related costs to be paid only on the basis of proven need.
  - Full funding for services and representatives of workers and service users.
- Free public utilities:
  - To all at age, abolish university tuition fees now and redistribute more than a worker's wage. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- Free housing: a maximum 35-hour week with no loss of pay.
- Free health care: full state funded free at the point of use.
- Free quality homes in every area.
  - No to the bosses’ “pension fund” tax.
- Free cooperation in all industries. No to nuclear power. No to Trident.
- Free, publicly run, good quality education, available to all at age, abolish university tuition fees now and redistribute more than a worker’s wage. Support the National Shop Stewards Network.
- Free public utilities: To pay only on the basis of proven need. Full funding for services and representatives of workers and service users.

What reaction forces threaten to escalate the crisis into a war

The crisis in Ukraine has deep roots in the expansion of imperialist interests and growing economic interdependence on Russia. The intervention is not driven by genuine concern for the well-being of ethnic Russians, as well as real concerns of Russians, as well as the US, when its key economic interests are at stake.

The Russian Duma rushed through a new law to allow Russian passports to be issued to any ethnic Russian living in Ukraine. It also passed a law allowing of another country to be amended to Russia if the government of that country is deemed “unsuitable.”

The Putin regime’s military moves follow the ousting of President Yanukovych and the formation of a pro-western regime in Kiev. The western powers’ reckless meddling in Ukraine and the response of Russia has created the most serious military crisis in Europe since the Russia-Georgia war.

The last week initially saw a mass movement against the corrupt and authoritarian Yanukovych regime and the oligarchs. This movement had features of a revolution, displaying the power of the masses, which led to the disintegration of the Yanukovych regime and the state apparatus.

But in the absence of powerful workers’ organisations, reactionaries, opposition politicians, hard-line Ukrainians and the far-right Svoboda party and Right Sector were able to dominate the opposition, arousing deep suspicions and fears among the ethnic Russian population.

With barely disguised hypocrisy, US Secretary of State John Kerry condemned Russia’s “violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

Yet the US, when its key imperialist interests are at stake, carries out military interventions into other “sovereign” territories. The military superpowers invaded and occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, at a huge human cost.

Despite the western powers’ howls of rage over Russian forces seizing control of Crimea, Nato forces occupied or are occupying areas after arming and militarily supporting the Ko-sevans.

Hundreds were detained, by police, including CWI members, for taking part in anti-war protests

In response, the EU and US threatened economic sanctions and Nato sabre rattles. The Western-backed Ukrainian regime has ordered full mobilisation to counter the intervention. The working people of Ukraine will pay dearly for any escalation of the conflict.

Socialists call for an end to all imperialist interference and military interventions throughout Ukraine. These reactionary forces threaten to escalate the crisis into a war. This raises the terrible prospect of ethnic and national conflicts in the region, similar to the bloody wars that dismembered Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The CWI in the region calls for the creation of anti-war committees in both Russia and Ukraine, including Crimea. Democratically-organised committees can carry out cross-ethnic defence of any groups under attack by the far-right or Russian chauvinists.

Just a week ago, an opinion poll said that 73% of the population were then against Russia intervening. On Sunday 3 March, hundreds were detained by police, including CWI members, for taking part in anti-war protests in different cities. However, Putin’s chauvinist policies, “protecting ethnic Russians” in Ukraine, will most likely ensure a temporary boost of support at home. With the fall of President Yanukovych, the Russian elite were dealt a severe blow. Russia lost significant economic interests and what influence it had over the Kiev government. As it did in South Ossetia before the war with Georgia, the Russian regime stepped up its campaigns in “Defence” of ethnic Russians in the Ukraine.

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