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NATIONALISE ENERGY FIGHT THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

There is nothing inevitable about the dire predictions for rising poverty coming to pass. The mass inability to pay energy bills that's on the cards, with the illness, suffering and even deaths that will bring, must be resisted. Mass workers' action can change the course of events in the interests of the working class.

What is threatened is horrendous. Over half the UK population is expected to be in fuel poverty by Christmas. Millions of parents are sick with worry at the prospect of sending their kids to school under-fed, only to have them come back to cold homes in the evening. Pensioners, disabled people and others hit hard by Tory inflation austerity are forced to be fearful of the future.

With 62% of households already struggling to pay their bills, it's predicted that average energy costs will rise in January to £3,615 a year, a 283% rise in just nine months. The energy regulator now plans to raise the cap four times a year, rather than twice.

Meanwhile the energy companies are making money hand over fist. BP announced quarterly profits of £6.9 billion, its highest figure for 14 years. Worldwide, oil and gas corporations have made \$3 billion in profit a day every day for the last 50 years.

These obscene profits are pushing anger up even faster than the bills are rising. Given there is no reason to have confidence in the Tories to act, the search is on for ways to resist inflation poverty.

As chancellor, Sunak was forced to u-turn on help for bills almost immediately after he presented his spring budget. The two factors in this retreat were polls predicting massive Tory election losses and a growing mood for strike action. The trade union and socialist movement needs to build on this to develop a programme of workers' defence against poverty.

Since then those strike ballots have been realised in a growing strike wave with widespread support. The pay strikes show a way forward in the fight against poverty. In the last year, for example, 63,000 Unite members have gone into disputes winning over £50 million in



NSSN RALLY & LOBBY OF TUC CONGRESS

STRIKE together co-ordinate the action

Sunday 11 September, 1pm

Holiday Inn Hotel, Brighton

RALLY AND MARCH TO LOBBY THE TUC AT THE VENUE

pay increases. The price cap rise only makes it clearer that everyone needs to fight for a pay rise.

The action is growing – four days of strikes by 115,000 postal workers in the CWU have been announced as well as further rail strike dates, and plans for teachers, civil servants and more to join in taking action in the autumn. The Amazon workers' collective actions, including demanding a £15 an hour minimum wage, shows how as yet unorganised workers will be drawn into action. The protests by construction workers at oil refineries point to the power of organised workers in the energy sector.

All the potential is there to build a mass movement that can force the government back. The trade union leaders are increasingly looked to for a line of resistance against the Tories. They must now build on that to offer the leadership necessary to turn that potential into the building of a millions-strong movement that fights inflation poverty.

That means fighting for a strategy to unite workers and

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young people in action around a programme that includes: inflation-proofed pay rises, pensions and benefits; a £15 an hour minimum wage with no exemptions; rent caps, a programme of council house building and of home insulation; nationalisation of energy, water, rail, mail; and a socialist alternative to capitalist exploitation and poverty.

This battle must be waged in every field – in the workplaces, in the communities and at the ballot box.

PRO-CAPITALIST NON-SOLUTIONS

Former Labour leader Gordon Brown has called for an emergency budget, including temporary nationalisation of the energy companies. Yet Keir Starmer's Labour has refused to back the strikes and dropped Corbyn's call for nationalisation.

Asked on BBC Radio 4's Today programme whether Labour supports public ownership of rail, water and energy, shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves pointed to the fact that Starmer had scrapped the 2019 manifesto, and suggested its cost would conflict with her determination to balance the books. But that's why nationalisation would need to be implemented without compensation being paid to fat-cat shareholders, only to those who could prove their need.

The other argument against, is that it would take too long, but 51 years ago a Tory government was forced to step in and nationalise Rolls Royce within 24 hours. This Tory government is even weaker and less able to defend the rotten capitalist system as its crisis grows. Nationalising the energy industry would mean that the bosses' hoarded cash could be put to use investing in green alternatives.

Unlike Brown's version, modelled on Labour's bailing out of the banks, we demand socialist nationalisation, under democratic workers' control as part of a socialist plan of production. This could end fuel poverty immediately. It could massively cut energy bills, with costs absorbed into government spending.

With a general election looming, building a new workers' party that stands firm in the interests of the working class is an urgent part of the fight against inflation poverty. A new workers' party would also provide a forum for the debate and discussion needed to develop the tactics for the movement. One pressing question which must be discussed is tactics for defeating the price cap and keeping families warm and fed.

NON-PAYMENT OF BILLS

There is a growing mood for direct action – including from the tens of thousands who have signed up to pledge to cancel their energy direct debits on 1 October. Whether or not people cancel their payments, millions will simply be unable to pay by the autumn.

Without doubt the poll tax remains relevant in many ways. The imposition of energy meters could become a flashpoint for which the poll tax's 'bailiff busting' holds valuable lessons. Those who are unable to pay their bills are likely to be threatened with pre-payment meters – already in place in over four million households – which are more expensive and can be used by energy companies to recoup losses. This means forcing people, in effect, to cut their own energy off. Smart meters can be converted into pre-payment meters remotely with a court order.

While there are many lessons of the poll tax that can be absorbed for building mass movements today, non-payment of the poll tax is not directly comparable to non-payment of energy bills.

For example, between the announcement of the price cap hike and its implementation in October is a matter of weeks. The poll tax victory was the result of a four-year campaign. Furthermore, not paying the poll tax did not carry the danger of being unable to heat your home or cook.

However, the difference between the backdrops to these two campaigns is the most significant difference which points to how the price hikes can be defeated. Thatcher had secured victories against the working class and was seen as the Iron Lady. This was not the case. The anti-poll tax movement led by Militant, the predecessor of the Socialist Party, reduced her to iron filings. But there is nothing iron-like about today's Tories. Today, working class-organised mass struggle is in the ascendancy – which was not the case in the late 1980s.

Given the weakness of the Tories and the growing strikes, the price cap can be cancelled and more. If a lead for such a campaign is given by the trade union leaders or even by Corbyn, and linked to coordinating the strikes, the calling of a mass national week-day demo, and the building of a working-class electoral challenge, not only the October price cap but the whole cost-of-living crisis could start to be turned around.

Councils could also step in – if there are councillors prepared to fight. A number of councils are already offering libraries and other public buildings to "give people the opportunity to stay warm where required". But councils could also top up Rishi Sunak's miserly increase to the Household Support Fund to meet real local needs and prevent anyone facing disconnection.

Local authorities are responsible for over one fifth of all public spending. Labour-led councils, 125 of them, control budgets of at least £82 billion. With the Tories split and in paralysis, why not use those significant council resources and powers to introduce measures that protect families? That could be transformative for the 29 million people living in those areas.

This debate on how families can be protected against the ravages of for-profit energy provision poses the question of how society is run. With profits rising alongside poverty, the question of provision of energy for need, not profit, is posed.

The fight against fuel and inflation poverty is the fight for a socialist world, in Britain starting with the nationalisation of the 150 major corporations that dominate the economy, which would give the working class the basis on which to start to plan how everyone can have a decent life.

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