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the Socialist

Issue 1269

4-10 April 2024

formerly **Militant**

Public services crumbling

SAVE OUR NHS

Make the super-rich pay

ALEX SMITH
LIVERPOOL SOCIALIST PARTY

Public satisfaction with the NHS has now fallen to its lowest level ever, 14 years after the Tories came to power.

The vast majority of the public still remain committed to the NHS's founding principles - 91% of people surveyed believe it should be free at the point of service, and 82% said that it should be funded primarily

from taxation and be available to everyone, irrespective of income.

But only 24% said they are satisfied with the current condition the service is in. For social care it's even lower - just 13%, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey.

No wonder the public is fed up with the current state of the NHS and social care - these services have been cut to the bone by the Tory government!

That the NHS is on life support under the Tories - a party which openly represents big business - will not surprise many. Big business sees the NHS as an enormous potential market to be privatised and run for profit, not need.

Rather than being destroyed through privatisation and cuts, the NHS and other public services need to be fully funded and renationalised under democratic workers' control. But we need politicians to fight for this.

Keir Starmer's Labour Party is appealing to represent the interests of big business and it won't fight for the funding our public services need. "There's no magic money tree", Starmer says. An incoming Labour government will not "turn the taps on" to reverse Tory cuts to local authorities either!

Starmer's Labour won't fight for fully funded public services, we need candidates that will. That's why Socialist Party

members will be standing in the upcoming May local elections under the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) banner. The working class needs political representatives who will fight to defend our public services.

The overwhelming majority of society's wealth is in the hands of a tiny super-rich elite. What we need is socialist change, so that that wealth is put into the hands of the working class, who can then decide - with a democratically planned economy based on a socialist plan of production - how and where money is spent. That way, human need and public services can be prioritised, not the private profit of big business.

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Josh Asker	Scott Jones
socialistparty.org.uk	Ian Pattison
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"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."
Karl Marx



Port Talbot and the steelworks LEWIS CLARKE/CC

Meet Tata bribes with strike action and steel nationalisation

ALEC THRAVES
SWANSEA SOCIALIST PARTY AND SWANSEA TRADES COUNCIL

Tata Steel bosses are now stepping up their 'non-negotiable' plan to shut the two remaining blast furnaces at its Port Talbot site, something the Socialist Party has consistently raised is on the cards. This means the loss of almost 2,000 steel jobs and a knock-on effect to thousands more across local communities.

Steel unions attempted to engage with Tata to try and convince the board of their alternative plans to retain 'primary' steel making. But large sections of the workforce had already recognised that the Tata chiefs had no intention whatsoever of reversing their devastating decision.

The recent unannounced and abrupt closure of the coke ovens was just the latest indication of the Tata bosses' intransigent position and their contempt for any serious negotiations with trade union leaders.

One steelworker commented on our campaign stall in Port Talbot at the end of March, that "management have no interest whatsoever in production targets because they are all preparing and implementing the decommissioning of the heavy end of the plant. To such an extent that they have even requested a written portfolio of all our tools to ensure that none of Tata's equipment is taken off site".

Tata's ruthless actions are now clear to everyone!

Chief executive officer, Rajesh Nair, has contacted all employees with what is claimed to be the 'most generous' redundancy offer in Tata's history.



Nationalisation is the only guarantee of saving the plant and saving all jobs.

The timing is deliberately aimed at undermining the industrial action ballots, midway through the process in Unite and being launched by the GMB and, the biggest steel union, Community, over the next few weeks.

However, this huge financial 'carrot' being dangled in front of steelworkers, similar to what the Ford Motor Company implemented in Bridgend, also has a vicious 'stick' alongside it.

In a blatant attempt to 'buy off' the workforce, Tata has added a pre-condition that these enhanced redundancy terms "are conditional upon there being no industrial action in the business".

So, the battle lines are crystal clear!

In order to combat Tata's 'most generous redundancy offer in history' and to achieve a massive 'Yes' vote for action, steelworkers must be convinced and confident of a strategy for victory and the retention of all jobs.

This will not be achieved by trying to persuade Tata or any other multinational corporation to invest the billions of pounds necessary to retain the furnaces under a green transition.

As the Socialist Party has demanded, nationalisation is the only

guarantee of saving the plant and saving all the jobs.

Government financing of a green transition for this 'critical' UK manufacturing industry by bringing it back into public ownership, has to become a concrete proposal and demand from all union leaders if they are to undermine Tata's blackmailing efforts on the workforce.

There can be no more false hopes or illusions that, even with some promised government subsidies, Tata will alter its position.

Unite, Community and the GMB must urgently demand that the sitting Welsh Labour government, and a future Keir Starmer-led government, likely to be in office in just a few months time, immediately nationalise Tata, under democratic workers' control and management with any compensation paid only on the basis of proven need, meaning nothing going to Tata bosses or big shareholders!

Nationalisation offers a future for Port Talbot and all the other sites across the UK. Now is the time for the steel unions to use their potential industrial strength, confront a brutal employer and demand that a Labour government defends steelworkers. If the last Labour government can nationalise and bail out the billionaire bankers, they can take the action needed to save our steel.

'Nationalisation not Devastation' - Support our steelworkers!

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Rowing on dirty rivers

Rowers competing in the Oxford-Cambridge boat race were warned not to enter the water due to the presence of E. coli. Water companies, including Thames Water, have come under fire for record sewage discharges into rivers over the last year. A rower looks at the consequences for the sport.

ANDY CRISP
READING SOCIALIST PARTY

For several years, I have rowed on the River Thames. The water has never been clean. Recently however, people noticed it looking even worse than normal. Rowers will ask me what the stuff is in the water floating around our boat and legs. I tell them: whatever it is, it means the water is filthy and they should be careful.

But you can only be so careful when rowing on the water. It is very common for someone in the boat to accidentally splash the person behind them, which can send river water straight into their mouth, potentially causing them to get very sick. I've heard multiple stories of people getting seriously ill from river water entering their system. One person had a cut on their leg which got covered in Thames water and they ended up in hospital. Another went for a quick dip in the Thames and ended up with a UTI, which left them sick for weeks. Neither of these instances are unique.

The dirtiness of the water has not been the only issue. Climate change has meant that rain has become more frequent and more intense which has led to the stream being so fast it's not safe to row on most of the time. The boathouse I use is fortunately on a tidal stretch of the Thames, which means we are able to go out during the flood tide, but these windows are short. During the ebb tide, the river has frequently been too dangerous for novice or even experienced rowers. This is the worst it has been in many years, with lots of clubs on non-tidal parts of the river completely unable to row on the water for months.



TEAM BEAR BONES/CC

THAMES WATER CRISIS: WE NEED SOCIALIST NATIONALISATION

CALLUM JOYCE
SOCIALIST PARTY SOUTHERN AND SOUTH EAST ORGANISER

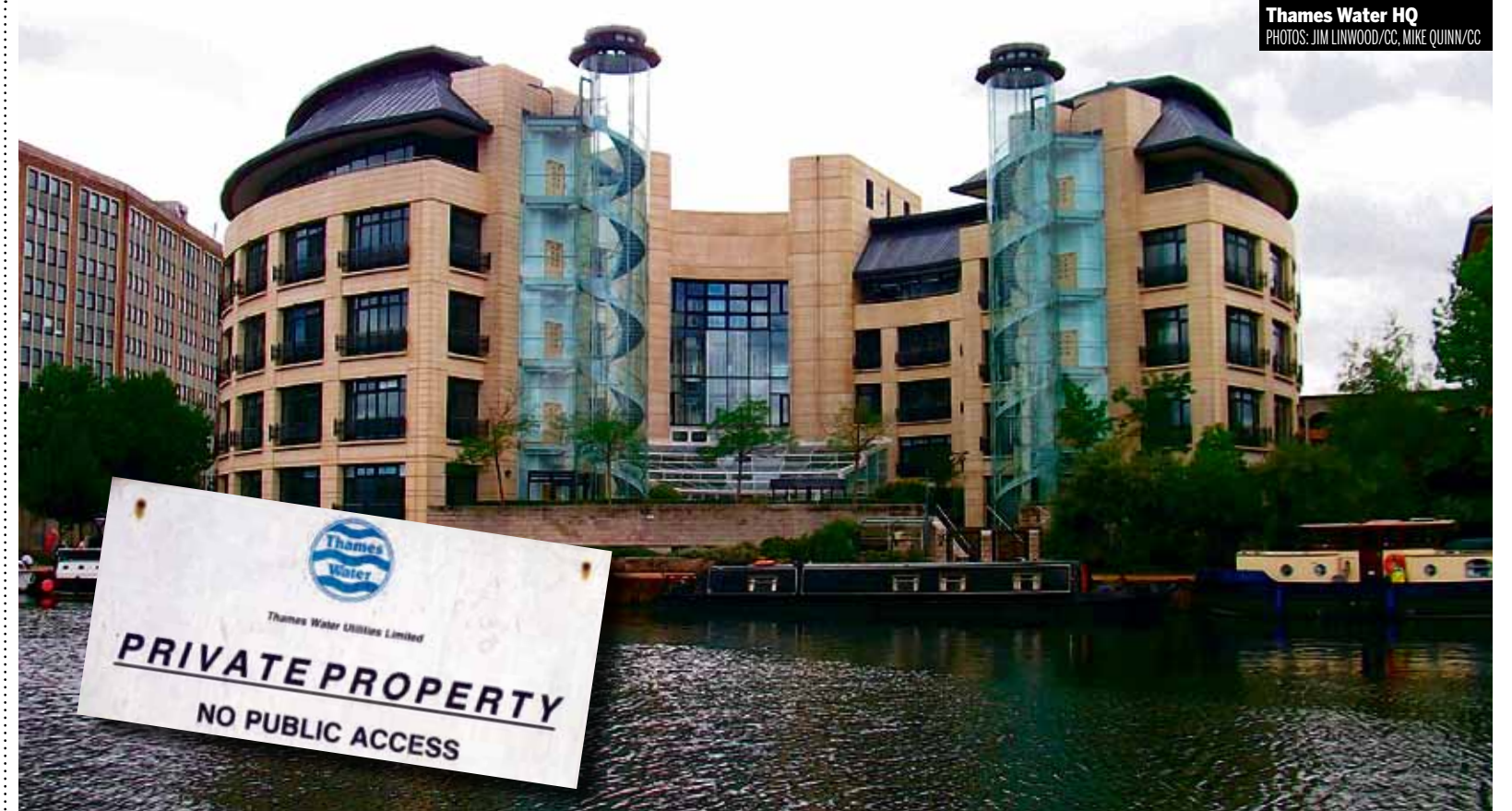
The crisis-ridden saga of Thames Water continues. Recent news suggests that a promised £3 billion of further investment into the company may be withheld, threatening the possibility that it will be unable to continue operating. At least £500 million of that was due to be provided this month, which Thames Water will need to service a £190 million debt that must be paid by the end of April.

Investors claim that Thames Water is no longer an attractive prospect for investment and they are making their continued investment conditional on Ofwat (the government body responsible for the regulation of the water and sewage industries) agreeing to reduce the amount of the fines the company could face for excess pollution and for paying dividends over a set limit. They are also asking for permission to raise consumer bills by 40% this year! This will mean more misery for the 16 million Thames Water customers who have already seen their energy, food, and housing costs rise over the past 18 months.

Thames Water and the other privatised water and sewage companies were set up as private enterprises in the 1980s as part of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal onslaught against public services, huge sectors of the economy were sold into private hands. The initial debts of these companies were actually wiped out by Thatcher and set to zero in order to encourage investment. Since then, Thames Water alone has accrued a massive £14 billion of debt. Its debt levels now equate to around 80% of the value of its total assets - despite Ofwat recommending water companies not to go above 60% due to the financial risks involved. This money has not been used to maintain and upgrade crucial infrastructure however, but has instead gone to shareholders in the form of over £7 billion of dividends paid out over the last 30 years.

Renationalisation

What happens now is still uncertain, but if the investors decide to walk away from the company it will face a crisis, as its current financial reserves will only enable it to continue functioning until May next year. The idea of renationalisation - for the government to step in and take ownership of the company to ensure a continued service, is being increasingly raised as a possibility by the capitalist press. The Tories are ideologically opposed to this; it would be a tacit admission that the claim Thatcher's neoliberal privatisations would encourage more investment is false. Pressure would grow to nationalise other polluting water companies, the crumbling railways, the postal service or the profiteering energy companies as well.



Thames Water HQ
PHOTOS: JIM LINWOOD/CC, MIKE QUINN/CC

£14 billion debt

It is likely that the Tories will first look to put Thames Water into 'special administration', essentially giving them power to send in commissioners to oversee a restructuring process within the company in order to make it more attractive to new investors. This would still allow existing shareholders to maintain their stakes in the company if they wished, and to continue making profit afterwards if such measures are able to save the company. In short, the government will try and save the day with no consequences for the profiteers who have run the service into the ground in the first place!

However, finding new investment is not guaranteed. If they are unable to do so even after administration, the government would likely be compelled to finally step in and nationalise it. A similar process occurred with the failure of Railtrack in 2002, a private company that was responsible for maintaining large parts of the rail infrastructure in Britain. The company was placed into administration after financial difficulties and temporarily managed by the New Labour government with the aim of handing it back into private hands once the financial issues were addressed. The government was unable to find any interested buyers however and was compelled to maintain Railtrack as a public body - making it into what we now know as Network Rail.

This could well be the future for Thames Water in the next period, although the Tories may hope that they can delay the issue until after the general election to leave it for Starmer's Labour to deal with instead. If either of these parties do agree to nationalisation however, it will not be as a socialist measure carried out

£7 billion of dividends since privatisation

in the interests of the working class, but a 'state capitalist' measure used to prop up their ailing system and cover for the failures of private ownership and management. This would also involve buying out the existing shareholders, at huge expense to the taxpayer while our other public services like the NHS are starved for cash. Nationalisation carried out in this way may save the service in the short term, but it will not resolve any of the underlying issues in the industry. This can be seen from the example of Scottish Water - it remains a publicly owned body but has still dumped huge amounts of sewage into rivers and lochs.

Socialist nationalisation

The solution is genuine socialist nationalisation - taking Thames Water into public ownership with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need and placing it under democratic workers' control and management, so that decisions on investment are made by accountable representatives of workers and service users. Only this would allow the investment into infrastructure that is required without the mismanagement of government-appointed bureaucrats.

This shouldn't be limited just to Thames Water however - the entire private water industry is in decline. Eight different water companies are at, or above, recommended debt levels and many of them have faced scandals due to excessive pollution. Southern Water is now asking for permission to increase bills by 70%! If Ofwat does not agree to these punishing conditions, then a similar investment crisis could occur all over the sector. Immediate nationalisation of

the whole industry will be necessary to prevent this.

The shareholders that have milked billions from a public service should not receive a penny of compensation. However, there are some pension funds which have invested in Thames Water, potentially with money from ordinary workers' pensions. In this case, those workers should be fully compensated. But this does not mean handing money over to big private pension firms - they should be nationalised as well! By nationalising the pension industry along with the banks and other key elements of the financial sector it would be possible to guarantee decent living pensions for everyone.

Clearly the Tories will never agree to the socialist nationalisation that is necessary - but neither will Starmer's Labour. He has committed to nothing more than giving Ofwat the power to block bonuses for water company executives until they resolve the issues within the sector - again leaving the solution in the hands of those who have created this mess in the first place! We need a new mass workers' party, backed by the trade unions, that will fight for nationalisation, not just of the utilities but all the major corporations and banks in Britain, so that they can be run under a democratic plan of production to meet the needs of all - in other words, to fight for a socialist society. Only on the basis of such a system will it be possible to provide the services that people need, free from the greed and exploitation of capitalism.

Do you agree?
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Men-only club reveals the sexism of the capitalist establishment

CORINTHIA WARD
SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL COMMITTEE

The elitist men-only Garrick Club has come under the spotlight after the Guardian newspaper released a list of prominent men who hold membership.

It is not the first time the 'gentlemen's club' has come under fire for its refusal to admit women. However - since the #MeToo movement, protests around Sarah Everard and other murdered women, as well as the sexist scandals surrounding the Met and other police forces - the anger against an influential all-men club has been posed more sharply.

Leading men in the judiciary and courts, including a supreme court judge, have been amongst the names leaked. The Bar Council, the organisation that represents 18,000 barristers in England and Wales, warned that exclusive members' clubs "create the potential for unfair advantage" for lawyers seeking to become judges, as well as adding to the reinforcement of gender-pay disparity within the profession. There are at least 150 barristers in the club while, at the same time, women are more than twice as likely as men to have suffered bullying or harassment at work in the industry.

There is also the question of how the biases of these men may affect the outcome of cases. When a judge is willing to attend a club which refuses the entry of women, are they unbiased when deciding the outcome of domestic abuse appeals cases? One senior woman barrister who raised this point via social media is now under disciplinary proceedings.

And the initial judge appointed to the case was also a member of the Garrick Club himself!

The club's approximately 1,500 membership is not just limited to the courts but includes members of the House of Lords, MPs, and heads of influential law firms, private equity companies and other businessmen, academics, actors, rock stars and journalists. Even the heads of MI6 and the civil service, who, since being named, have both cancelled their memberships.

The main solution on offer from the establishment is that the club needs to start admitting women. Seven women have been nominated by a group of members at the club who hope the ruling committee will now change the rules. One of the names suggested is ex-Tory MP Amber Rudd. Additionally, back in 2021, Cherie Blair backed a campaign to have women admitted.

Elitism

The sexism inherent in the Garrick Club is only one side of the coin - the other is the elitism and class composition of the people who make up the membership. The majority of members went from boarding schools to Oxbridge. These are senior figures who run our country, influence policies and direct industries which affect the lives of all ordinary workers. If any women are admitted they would undoubtedly be of the same class, people such as Amber Rudd and Cherie Blair, who are not representative of working-class women across the country.

Attacks on services mean women

are more economically vulnerable and feel the brunt of austerity more acutely, as they are more likely to need access to services, such as housing and domestic abuse services.

The inclusion of women into the Garrick Club may help a small number of women enter jobs in senior positions. But it will not challenge sexism on a broader scale that women experience from lower wages, precarious jobs or the uneven caring/cleaning responsibilities of the home. Capitalist women, just like their male peers, will continue to promote policies which benefit their class and drive a wedge between working-class men and women.

Elite clubs like the Garrick Club are networking, shoulder-rubbing venues - with meetings that potentially affect millions happening behind closed doors.

Sexist institutions like these private clubs and the role they play in society need to be challenged, by fighting for the interests of the working class and wider society. The Socialist Party fights for the building of a mass workers' party with a programme of nationalising the commanding heights of the economy - including rail, mail, energy and the banks - under workers' democratic control and management. Rather than decisions being made by a handful of individuals appointed by their friends, workers could have democratic control, with leaders democratically elected, subject to recall and with no material privileges.

British society is seeing a growing chasm between the rich and poor - only socialist policies can break with the minority hold of the capitalists. Policies such as funding quality public services, free education and childcare and the building of council homes would help both women and the working class to escape poverty and achieve things like career progression if they so choose.

This is why Socialist Party members will be standing in the upcoming elections, so working-class women and men have a voice at the ballot box which breaks with the interests of the 1%.

Free childcare? Tories take parents for fools

Fight for free, fully funded childcare



PHOTO: PAUL MATTESSON

A PARENT

The first stage of the flagship government scheme to roll out 'free childcare' came in on 1 April. But without the funding and investment needed to actually make it so, it's like a cruel April Fool's Day joke.

The headline is up to 30 hours free childcare for all two-year-olds. But the finer details are: 30 hours for children of working parents, and the already existing 15 hours for those on low incomes.

This was a very welcome announcement for parents straining under rising costs. As my toddler is currently in nursery 30 hours a week, with monthly fees about £850, genuinely free childcare would have transformed our situation.

Our hopes were quickly dashed when I realised that, as a part-time worker, I didn't earn enough to count as a working parent so our household was ineligible.

We eventually managed to secure the 15 hours which, with rising rent, food and other costs, is still a very welcome break.

Or at least it was until I opened the invoice this month. The government

doesn't cover the full cost of providing childcare - so the nursery charges a 'consumables fee' to cover costs not included, like food. That's £12 a day! Funding is also for term time only and, since it's the Easter holidays, that means two weeks of full costs. Those factors combined, and what was promoted as '30 free hours' has resulted in about £100 off the fees this month.

Some parents can claim up to 85% of childcare costs through Universal Credit - but this is paid in arrears with nursery fees paid up front. This puts a huge strain on finances. I'm already dreading the August invoice. The summer holiday means no funding and our bill will be several hundred pounds higher than our Universal Credit payment in July. Finding the difference will be a huge strain.

The situation is a confusing, piecemeal mess that's a world away from the "free childcare" being promoted. The system has been confusing and as many as two thirds of parents with two-year-olds don't even know about the scheme! Plus many families still struggle to access childcare at all, with thousands of providers closing in recent years.

Windfall tax con - demand socialist nationalisation of big energy

PHILIP STOTT
SOCIALIST PARTY SCOTLAND
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The recent Tory budget saw chancellor Jeremy Hunt announce a 12-month extension to the windfall tax on energy companies. The Energy Profits Levy (EPL) currently sits at 35% on top of the 40% corporation tax the companies are supposed to pay. All the main capitalist parties have been jockeying for position on the issue and some are split on it.

Scottish Tory leader Douglas Ross has said he cannot support the extension of the EPL until 2029. Ross has been acting as a mouthpiece for big energy by claiming more tax equals job losses. He was of course silent when, in the last few years, tens of thousands of workers have been made redundant as oil bosses were slashing costs to boost profits.

Scottish Tory leader Douglas Ross is desperate to exploit fears over jobs in the north east of Scotland as part of his efforts to cling on to Tory seats in Scotland ahead of the general election.

The Scottish National Party opposed the tax extension as well for the same reasons as Ross; that it would hit jobs, underlining the nationalist leadership's love affair with profiteering capitalism. Starmer's Labour supports the tax and has argued for an increase in the EPL from the current 35% to 38%. All parties support reducing the tax levy when and if energy prices fall.

The backdrop to the windfall tax introduced by Rishi Sunak in 2022 when he was chancellor was the rocketing energy prices and therefore profits of the big energy companies. It followed the inflationary spiral, the invasion of Ukraine, and a rise in demand for energy following the Covid pandemic.

The bottom line is, the energy companies have accumulated enormous profits. So much so that even the Tories could not pass up an opportunity to levy increased taxes on the oil and gas giants.

In practice, there are so many loopholes in the tax regime for the energy companies that they never actually have to pay the headline rates at all. The windfall tax was expected to raise £5 billion in the first year it was implemented in 2022/23. Barely half of that, £2.6 billion, was actually paid.

Before the EPL was levied in 2022, oil and gas companies were supposed to pay a 40% rate of tax. But, according to a BBC report, "oil and gas firms have been able to reduce the amount of tax they pay by factoring in losses or spending on things like decommissioning North Sea oil platforms."

As a result, BP and Shell have paid almost no UK tax in recent years. Both firms received more money back from the UK government than they paid every year from 2015 to 2020 (except Shell in 2017). Between 2015 and 2021, Shell paid a negative tax bill of -£685m. For BP it was -£107m.

BP made £41 billion in global profits in the two years 2022 and 2023. Shell's were £62 billion over the same period.

It was only the introduction of the windfall tax that has seen the oil and gas multinationals have to start paying some tax in the UK. But again, this can be offset by a range of loopholes.

According to the BBC report, "Companies are offered big tax benefits if they invest in oil and gas extraction. For every £100 they invest they can claim back £91.40 in tax relief. And if they spend £100 decarbonising the way they extract oil and gas they can claim up to £109.25 in tax benefits."

The controversial Rosebank development, north west of Shetland, has seen the £3.1 billion investment so far by the Norwegian state-owned company and Ithaca qualify for £2.9 billion in tax relief. In other words, it's a state-funded subsidy for big business.

Amidst an ever-growing climate emergency, nothing less than the full-scale nationalisation of the energy sector under democratic workers' control and management will be able to deliver the urgent investment in renewable alternatives that are essential.

At a time of record lay-offs and redundancies in the North Sea, a socialist-led transition away from fossil fuels would also guarantee job security for workers. The current rigged system is designed to ensure the global energy giants continue to make billions while workers, communities and the environment pay the price.



PHOTO: JDC/CC

£103 billion

Combined global profits of BP and Shell in 2022 and 2023

Privatisation, delays and billions over budget - 25 years of digital failure

ROB PETEFAR
SWINDON SOCIALIST PARTY AND
SOFTWARE ENGINEER



PHOTO: FLORIAN HIRZINGER/CC

For a quarter of a century, successive UK governments have consistently failed to roll out large-scale digital infrastructure projects. It is the norm for a project to be delivered tens of millions of pounds over budget, years late and not delivering the stated objectives, found a report published last year by the National Audit Office. The Post Office Horizon IT system, evidence from which was used to wrongly convict thousands of subpostmasters, is but one of many failed projects delivered by a system completely unfit for purpose.

Additional reports published in 2020 and 2021 illustrate damning details of complacency and the lack of competency riddling all government departments including the cabinet office.

They revealed a complete lack of understanding of the complexities of government systems. And even a lack of knowledge why these systems are important! Key decisions made by executive staff with little if any experience with digital systems show the lack of democracy within the civil service.

The moving of traditional paper-based or semi-digital systems to fully digital systems is a complex task that can require a fundamental rebuilding of a system from first principles. This requires a thorough understanding

of the desired outputs of the system and the people that have to interact with it.

Without this, a finished system is incomplete, or one that faces expensive delays as changes and adaptations are made to allow it to mesh with the existing systems and processes it was supposed to work with.

The lack of democracy in workplaces, in the private and public sectors, where ordinary workers most skilled with the needs of the workplace are not given democratic control, creates wastage and problems.

In January 2021, the cabinet office created the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) to lead the digital, data and technology function across government. It produced a road map, something lacking for the past 25 years, of how to put the government on a firmer footing going forwards. £8 billion of funding was also allocated towards improving IT infrastructure across the board, £2.7 billion of which is for work on legacy IT infrastructure. However, the recent spike in inflation has put pressure on these budgets. The Tory government has been firm that no further funding will be provided. At the same time, the CDDO will be competing against existing department priorities.

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of the desired outputs of the system and the people that have to interact with it. Without this, a finished system is incomplete, or one that faces expensive delays as changes and adaptations are made to allow it to mesh with the existing systems and processes it was supposed to work with. The lack of democracy in workplaces, in the private and public sectors, where ordinary workers most skilled with the needs of the workplace are not given democratic control, creates wastage and problems. In January 2021, the cabinet office created the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) to lead the digital, data and technology function across government. It produced a road map, something lacking for the past 25 years, of how to put the government on a firmer footing going forwards. £8 billion of funding was also allocated towards improving IT infrastructure across the board, £2.7 billion of which is for work on legacy IT infrastructure. However, the recent spike in inflation has put pressure on these budgets. The Tory government has been firm that no further funding will be provided. At the same time, the CDDO will be competing against existing department priorities.

And the quality of data held within these systems can be poor. The Public Accounts Committee in 2019 found the Home Office is making life-changing decisions using "incorrect data from systems that are not fit for purpose". Glaring issues found during the Windrush scandal had still not been fixed. The layering of new systems and automation on top, are more likely to magnify problems than solve them. Given Labour's shadow health minister Wes Streeting's constant proposals for AI technology to streamline the NHS, this is a sobering thought.

Both Labour and the Tories are calling for more involvement in the public sector by private companies. There are more than enough unscrupulous consultancy agencies willing to spin complex and poorly thought-out projects for as long as possible, growing fat on profit siphoned from public funds.

And let's not forget that the end goal for most of these projects is saving money by reducing headcount - ie job losses.

Instead of wasted resources and private profit, there is an alternative - a socialist system with a democratically planned economy. Experts could work together with everyday workers and users of systems to build integrated digital infrastructure fit for the 21st Century. In a society where the working class is in control, the tools of the digital age can finally be unleashed to their full potential.



The Garrick Club PHOTO: SPUD GUN/CC

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Liverpool museums PCS Broad Left Network strike rally

STEVE ION
MERSSEY-SIDE SOCIALIST PARTY

Strikes by Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members at the seven constituent museums of National Museums Liverpool have continued strongly, with more than 200 workers striking and well-attended picket lines. Their demand is simple: for the £1,500 cost-of-living payment authorised by the government in June 2023 and still unpaid by museum management.

Socialist Party members, working with allies in the PCS Broad Left Network (BLN) - an organisation within the union that seeks to unite socialist reps to build a fighting, democratic PCS - organised a BLN-called rally in support of the strike on 28 March.

More than 30 pickets attended the rally, which was addressed by Matt Exley, branch officer of the PCS National Museums Liverpool branch, as well as Dave Walsh of Liverpool Trades Council and Dave Semple, Socialist Party member and BLN candidate for PCS Vice President in the union elections beginning on 18 April.

Matt laid out the basic fairness of the workers' case against the employer, which has more than sufficient funds to pay out the £1,500. Initially claiming that it did not have any money, the employer moved to a "final offer" of £250, then a further "final offer" of £500, then another "final offer" of £750, during the six weeks of strike action already taken. Matt, warmly welcomed the

support given by the BLN to the dispute, with BLN supporters in regular attendance at pickets.

Dave Walsh outlined the proud labour history of the city of Liverpool and the need for maximum unity of working-class people in the face of further attacks on workers' rights. He explained how the developing crisis of capitalism is now moving into the open, with a recession in Britain's economy now a matter of public record. He cautioned that workers will need to be on guard even should Starmer's Labour be elected, as Starmer had ditched most of the pro-worker and pro-environment policies of Jeremy Corbyn.

Dave Semple gave full solidarity to the dispute from the BLN's national steering committee. He put forward a number of possible routes forward for the dispute but insisted that the basic attitude of the PCS left to the dispute had to be that the fight continues until victory.

He stated clearly that any attempt to impose a settlement on the National Museums Liverpool branch by the union's National Disputes Committee or National Executive Committee would be opposed by the BLN, and that, should there be a decision by the branch to escalate the dispute, BLN would give the Liverpool museums workers full support.

A number of strikers showed an interest in the BLN at the end of the meeting.

● **The strike continues until 14 April**



PHOTOS: STEVE ION



Vote Marion Lloyd for president and for a fighting left PCS NEC

See the full list of candidates at socialistparty.org.uk/PCScandidates2024

Usdaw: Prepare for action to resist Morrisons management attacks

A FORMER MORRISONS USDAW REP

The latest in a series of attacks by Morrisons' private equity owners has been a cut in the pension contributions of workers. Currently, Morrisons workers pay 3% of their salary in pension contributions, while the company puts in 5%. This is set to be reversed over a series of stages so that workers will pay 5% and the company 3%. This is nothing short of an attack on the pay of Morrisons workers and has correctly met with opposition from their trade union Usdaw, which was not consulted by the company on these changes.

In response, Morrisons reps have reported that Usdaw has asked them to get the membership ready for a potential strike ballot. Given the direction the company has gone since the private equity takeover, this is a welcome step. Workers have welcomed that Usdaw is stepping up to challenge these attacks.

Our understanding is that the plans are in limbo pending the outcome of the annual pay negotiations. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that

Morrisons may make a sufficient pay offer, giving workers a substantial pay rise to catch up with the increased cost of living and to cover the increased pension contributions being imposed. If the company fails to do this, then it should be rejected.

If the offer is inadequate, it is important that Usdaw's negotiating team recommends a clear rejection. Usdaw failed to reject the last two pay offers. Despite our criticisms of the mandatory arbitration clauses over pay in Usdaw's recognition agreement with Morrisons, we believe that we should not allow the lack of a rejection recommendation to be used by arbitration service Acas to justify siding with management for a third time.

Indeed, the workplace ballot of the membership over an offer could be an important gauge of the preparedness of the membership to take action and to identify where additional resources may need to be put in to win a statutory industrial action ballot. Meetings of Usdaw members on a local or regional basis, or even a national online meeting for all Morrisons Usdaw members, would be

other key ways to prepare.

But preparation is needed externally as well as internally. The full resources of the union should be mobilised behind Morrisons members. This means rallying all Usdaw members behind the workers and appealing for other TUC affiliates to lend their support too. This could include public rallies of support, as GMB workers did in Asda several years ago when threatened by fire and rehire, marching on the company's head office in Leeds.

While workers in the distribution wings of supermarkets in warehouses and road transport have taken action in recent years, this year has already seen the first strike action by retail workers in a long time as Asda workers organised by GMB have taken action. But for Morrisons workers to take strike action on a national scale will be something the retail sector has not seen in decades. This is why there is so much potentially at stake in this situation where victory or defeat could have important ramifications for the position of all retail workers in years to come.

Unison health conference - start the fight on pay now!

ADRIAN O'MALLEY
UNISON HEALTH SERVICE GROUP EXECUTIVE,
PERSONAL CAPACITY

Unison health conference takes place at a critical time for all NHS workers. The NHS is in crisis, with the highest number of staff vacancies on record coinciding with millions of patients waiting for basic care. Staff morale is at rock bottom after years of austerity, followed by the Covid pandemic, followed by further austerity and increased demand.

Conference meets just a week after NHS workers should have received their 2024-25 pay rise. As has become the norm, the Tory government has delayed implementation of the pay uplift by pushing back the NHS Pay Review Body (PRB) announcement to 'sometime in May'. This year, they have failed to even make their own recommendation to the PRB, falsely giving the impression that the PRB is somehow independent of the government and will come up with an award that will benefit NHS workers within the budget the service 'can afford'.

NHS workers have seen through the sham of the PRB. Unison, Unite, GMB and RCN members are demanding direct talks with the employers over pay, terms and conditions. Unfortunately, the leaderships of the unions have been unable to agree a joint pay claim to the government. Each union is putting forward its own demands, but all are calling for a substantial above-inflation increase.

This is most certainly needed, with NHS workers' pay having been devalued by at least 15% in real terms during the 14 years of Tory rule. Low pay within the NHS has become endemic. The increase in the national minimum wage to £11.44 has resulted in Band 2 workers being paid less than 1p an hour more than the minimum wage!

A substantial pay rise has become a necessity. This conference is Unison's opportunity to take the lead and launch a campaign for a decent pay rise for all NHS workers, in particular the lowest paid.

We must build on the last two years of action within the NHS, and the 34% turnout in our last ballot in 2022, by ensuring that every branch smashes the 50% turnout threshold needed to take strike action. This means balloting as soon as possible. We cannot repeat previous years' mistakes of balloting in October when the pay rise had already been imposed by the government.

Strikes that have taken place have delivered results. Thousands of Unison Health Care Assistant members have voted for strike action and have won campaigns to move on to Band 3, with back pay. Consultants won an average pay rise of 9% and junior doctors have been offered an average of 12.5% and are still in dispute. These are the type of pay rises that Unison should be demanding.

We should also be linking our campaign with Unison members in local government, schools and universities who are fighting the same fight against the same common enemy, the Tory government.

We need to fight for a strong, democratic and accountable union that involves and informs members. That's why re-electing Socialist Party members to the health SGE is important.

We call on Unison to stand up to the government and demand direct talks on pay. Refuse to accept the remit of the Pay Review Body. Coordinate our claim and pay campaign with the other NHS trade unions. Launch a campaign among our members for industrial action immediately, and start the industrial action balloting process as early as possible to avoid members voting when the

government has already imposed a below-inflation rise.

These are the policies we vote for every year at Unison health conference. We need to make them a reality!

We demand:

- An inflation-busting pay rise and a campaign for pay restoration for all health and care staff including those in privatised sectors. A minimum wage of £15 an hour. Scrap zero-hours contracts immediately
- Any pay talks with the government to include restoring sick pay and cuts to unsocial hours payments
- A 35-hour week without loss of pay
- We want the Tories out but we need a workers' voice in parliament! Unison should support candidates that support our members and policies. Fight for a new mass workers' party
- Reverse all privatisations. Scrap the PFI and cancel the debts. Bring all outsourced workers and services in-house on a permanent contract
- A fully publicly funded NHS and care system free at the point of use, under democratic control. Nationalise the private health care sector, medical supply industry and the pharmaceutical companies

The following Socialist Party members are seeking nomination for the 2024 Unison service group elections

Health
Steve Bell,
Adrian O'Malley
Local Government
Mathew John,
Angie Waller
Community
Helen Couchman

NEU: Yes to action on pay and funding!



PHOTO: PAUL MATTSOON

SHEILA CAFFEY
NEU EXEC, PERSONAL CAPACITY

Teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) in schools and sixth forms in England and Wales have voted, in indicative ballots, overwhelmingly in favour of strike action over pay and funding, and exceeded 50% turnouts in each case.

This is a fantastic achievement for all the reps and members of our union! Most areas have had significant increases in membership since the last indicative ballot, so this includes thousands more teachers.

This is a strong mandate to move to a formal strike ballot. There will be a debate at national conference about whether to do so. Socialist Party members will say: Yes!

Thanks to Socialist Party members and other serious fighters on the Executive, we have a clear policy to

consider ballot increases in the final week rather than just the overall turnout when considering next steps.

We will be arguing for a strong campaign to mobilise and engage the membership, highlighting funding as well as pay, and calling for a timeline that allows serious and escalating action in the summer term, and into the autumn if necessary. This campaign should include teachers and support staff, whose indicative ballot ends soon.

We can share dates at the start of term as part of building for the ballot, so that trips, etc can be moved. A campaign of action during June and July, which would build up momentum for the autumn, would pressure the Tory government and make clear our demands on the Starmer-led government we expect to see following a general election.

● **NEU conference takes place 3-6 April 2024**

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the Socialist

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- Resources and enquiries: scottjones@socialistparty.org.uk
- Final deadline 24 April



PHOTO: REPTONLX/CC



Ambulance workers in Unison on strike in 2023. MIKE LUFF

We're fighting back to defend our services

TRADE UNIONIST AND SOCIALIST COALITION



TUSC, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, is the electoral coalition under which the Socialist Party stands in elections. TUSC is standing 290 anti-austerity and anti-war candidates in the local elections on 2 May. It was set up in 2010, co-founded by the late Bob Crow - then general secretary of the RMT transport workers' union - with the primary goal of enabling trade unionists, community campaigners and socialists to stand candidates against pro-austerity establishment politicians. Find out more visit: tusc.org.uk

Parent campaign forces Labour council backtrack on nursery closure date

The fight continues

IAIN DALTON
PARENT OF A CHILD AT A LITTLE OWLS NURSERY

Just one week after issuing letters to parents, putting 15 of 24 council-run Little Owls nurseries under threat, with three due to close as soon as May, the council issued a new letter to parents.

The council has now delayed the three proposed closures until August, and setup an 'engagement' process with parents. Instead of making a final decision in mid-April, we are now told this will be "early summer".

This retreat by the council was welcomed at a Zoom meeting of around 70 parents that I hosted, just hours after parents got this news. Parents who thought that they may have to give up their jobs because of the closures felt huge relief.

But parents were clear that the Labour council had only done this because our campaigning over the last week had forced it back. Given how angry parents are about how this has been approached, we are determined to keep the pressure up on the council, until the proposals are dropped altogether.

We have hope

One parent, Liz, expressed to the BBC: "We know that the fight isn't over. We are organised and determined. We hope that, after some real and open consultation, the council realise that this 'proposal' was a mistake."

The meeting established a steering committee for the campaign, and plan a lobby of the council executive on 17 April.

A parent, who organised a now over 600-strong petition to save Little Owls in Chapel Allerton, organised a rally on 30 March outside the nursery. Parents and children from other nurseries supported Chapel Allerton parents, who got good support from the local community.

Parents have been told by local councillors that they don't want to close nurseries, but that they have no choice because of the council financial crisis.

But, why not? Instead of boosting the council's general reserves by £3 million, as promised in the council's budget, why can't this money be used to keep all the nurseries open?

Why can't the Labour council demand that Keir Starmer, who is likely to win the general election due in the next year, increase funding for child-care, and restore local government funding?



Iain (left) protesting with the other parents LEEDS SOCIALIST PARTY

Socialist Party members, including myself, are standing as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) across Leeds on 2 May, and will make saving the nurseries a key part of our campaign.

That Labour is proposing these cuts, and that not one of the six other parties represented on the council put forward an amendment to oppose the cuts to nurseries, highlights the vital need for workers' representatives on the council that will use that

position to help mobilise struggles against cuts to our public services.

LOBBY THE COUNCIL'S EXECUTIVE BOARD
WEDNESDAY 17 APRIL, OUTSIDE LEEDS CIVIC HALL, 12-1PM

• Read what we said when the closures were first announced - 'Parents will fight nursery closures by Leeds Labour council' at socialistparty.org.uk

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Protesting about SEND cuts outside Leicester Council STEVE SCORE

▶▶ CONTINUED ON PAGE 10 - READ MORE ABOUT THE TUSC CHALLENGE

Coventry Labour's record attacking workers and residents

ADAM HARMSWORTH
TUSC CANDIDATE IN EARLSDON

New cuts and charges adding up to nearly £20 million by the Labour council will worsen the lives of many. Disabled 16 to 18-year-olds are already charged for school transport. That charge is going up £180 a year.

Council tax is going up by the maximum allowed 4.99%, and council tax benefit is being cut. Most of the city's street lights are going off between midnight and 5:30am.

The Coventry Rape And Sexual Abuse Centre (Crasac), the only specialist service of its kind in the city, has lost its council funding. Details of £11 million of the cuts haven't even been announced yet.

These cuts will make the city less safe, and will drive more residents into poverty and desperation. What hope is there for a decent future?

The problems

Since I moved to Coventry, the city has become more impoverished and rundown. Begging and sleeping on the streets are rife, gang violence and knife crime have risen.

Building affordable housing has been pushed aside in favour of over-priced tower blocks, while landlords convert former family homes into as many boxrooms as they can to cram students in.

The Labour council has focused on appealing to landlords over residents and students - a fair few Labour councillors are landlords themselves! Coventry's Labour-run council caught national attention two years ago with its appalling attacks on striking bin workers. The council's campaign of propaganda, running waste drop-off sites, and hiring scabs, cost the city £10 million.

For a council that has been stripped

of so much money by central government, this burning of council funds to attack its own workforce - members of Labour-affiliated Unite the Union - was utterly unforgivable.

I stood on the bin workers' picket line on many days, discussing the battle with them, alongside many other issues. I stood for TUSC in the 2022 local elections, in part to oppose the anti-union attacks by the council.

That year, TUSC took over 1,000 votes in Coventry, but Labour kept control of the council. Astonishingly, the Labour leader of the council, George Duggins, gloated about beating "Sharon's candidates". Sharon being Unite's general secretary Sharon Graham, who condemned the council over its attack on the bin workers.

Alongside its £20 million cuts, the Labour council has disgracefully approved the fire and rehire of its bin workers on worse terms and conditions. Unite has condemned this, and Coventry Trades Union Council organised a protest against the Labour council's cuts. We need to push them out, and get workers' voices back in the council chamber.

Greens

The Greens recently won two councillors for the first time in Coventry, showing that it is possible for other forces to win seats. Sadly, the Greens have voted for Labour's horrendous cuts, and did not oppose the bin workers' fire and rehire.

More Green councillors won't end the poverty, deprivation, cuts and closures brought about by the Labour council. But socialist councillors have been elected before in Coventry, and have built opposition to cuts and privatisation in the city. Coventry can have a better future, but it has to be fought for.

Leicester Labour faces fury after cutting disabled children's transport

STEVE SCORE
LEICESTER SOCIALIST PARTY, AND PARENT OF A SEND CHILD

Parents and special needs young people protested outside Leicester Council's education scrutiny meeting on 26 March. We were expressing our distress and anger at the council's heartless decision to stop school transport and travel support for 16 to 19-year-olds with special educational needs and disability (SEND). We were joined by Socialist Party members, NHS campaigners, and trade unionists.

The Labour council argues that, despite a legal requirement for young people to remain in education or apprenticeship until 18, the provision of SEND travel support for children aged 16 and over is not a statutory requirement, and can therefore enable them to cut spending.

Poverty

In a city where over 40% of children officially live in poverty, the council is picking on the most vulnerable in making its cuts, including, for example, ending funding for adventure playgrounds. They claim these cuts are necessary to avoid council 'bankruptcy'.

Cuts to SEND transport are not

just restricted to Leicester, and are increasingly being implemented by councils across the country. For many parents, this is just the latest in a series of battles they must go through to get diagnoses, to get Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP) agreed to enable necessary funding to get children into school, and then often a battle to get suitable places. Nationally there are thousands of SEND children who do not have school places, because of lack of provision.

"Exceptional cases"

SEND parents and carers were alerted to the cut by letter in late January, and were told that in "exceptional cases" they could contact the council to appeal. However, the appeals process is not clearly defined, and does not allow an independent second-stage review.

The council has made clear that the exceptions do not include parents who are working, cannot afford the cost, have other children to take to school, or students in wheelchairs.

One parent, Esther Cameron, said: "There has been no consideration at all to our son's specific needs, details of which we provided, including identifying key barriers around his specific vulnerability. The email

we received which declined our application offered Travel Training, to a destination where there are no public transport links!"

Give up work

Other parents would have to give up work to get their child to school, and there is no doubt the level of absence from school would shoot up.

Several of us went into the scrutiny meeting from the protest to ask the council a series of questions. I asked a question on the consultation process that the council claimed happened over two years ago. Despite what the council says, parents say they were never informed of this 'consultation', nor the subsequent decision.

Parents have organised themselves into a campaign group, and will not let this rest. The Socialist Party fully supports the campaign, and argues that the council should be refusing to make cuts, and instead build a massive campaign, enlisting the support of workers and the public, including parents such as us, to fight the government for extra money.

• Read what Steve's son, Ben Score, said to local politicians at socialistparty.org.uk - 'Leicester Labour cuts disabled children's transport'

SOCIALIST ELECTION APPEAL



Help us raise £50,000 to stand 30-40 Socialist Party candidates in the general election

• To make a pledge, email isai@socialistparty.org.uk

£50,000

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£6,193

Help the TUSC local election challenge

Oxford – we can't afford to live, we can't afford to travel

JAMES BONNER
TUSC CANDIDATE IN ST CLEMENTS

I'm proudly joining nearly 300 TUSC candidates standing in local elections nationwide, including 11 others standing in Oxford.

The two main issues we're campaigning on are housing and public transport. Like most areas, housing costs are rising in Oxford. The average monthly rent here is now over £1,600.

Homeless

More people are becoming homeless. Others are being forced to move out of the city, or live in substandard accommodation.

There is a huge shortage of social housing, with over 3,000 households on the waiting list. I live in social housing, so I'm familiar with the long, incredibly stressful wait for a home. A sizeable proportion will never be housed.

I have assisted people challenging housing decisions made by councils, while volunteering as a community

advocate, which has further shown me the devastation a lack of suitable housing has on people's lives.

The Labour council could take responsibility, and act to properly address the situation, such as by building large numbers of council homes, and demanding more funding from Westminster.

Instead, Labour locally is asking private companies to build a small number of 'affordable' homes on new unaffordable developments. Labour is also telling people to apply to other local councils in Oxfordshire.

Not only will this buck-passing put more pressure on housing stock and waiting list in other areas, but it will also force people to move away from their support networks, such as family and friends, leaving them more isolated.

This is made worse by poor public transport in Oxford, and even more so in Oxfordshire. Bus services are limited in many areas. In some places, they're scheduled less than hourly and finish as early as 7pm.

For people such as myself, who do not drive, this makes travelling difficult. Using multiple buses is also expensive, and some people cannot afford to.

The city council could take action now to improve services, pressuring the county council to do the same. They could also unilaterally subsidise bus fares in Oxford. Instead, they do nothing.

Labour failure

The council's failure to act on these issues and to help the working class is a purely political choice, rooted in a failed capitalist system. Labour councillors act in line with party directions, with little regard for those who are affected most.

By standing as a candidate in the elections, I am part of a challenge against the dominance of capitalist, big-party politicians. As TUSC candidates, we stand together with the working class, and against politicians that will never work in our interests.

Sheffield 'rainbow coalition' cut £43 million from social care

LIAM BALL
TUSC CANDIDATE IN GRAVES PARK

As a personal assistant for adults with learning disabilities, I see opportunities every day for economic planning to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in our society.

Sheffield City Council does not share this view. Last year, it cut £43 million from the social care budget alone.

Council bragging

The council even bragged that it decided the budget early, after just 12 minutes of discussion. This is not 'efficient'. This is inhumane!

The council is yet to implement most of these cuts, which means they're clearly struggling to find anything that won't collapse if they cut it. And there's still time for us to fight these cuts too.

Sheffield council is run by a 'rainbow coalition' of Labour, Greens, and Lib Dems. This means all of the capitalist alternatives to the Tories have had their chance and squandered it.

They have done nothing to aid the 20,000 people stuck on waiting lists for council housing in the city. There are countless empty units in my ward, Graves Park, that could be used as temporary accommodation for those

in need. Instead, the council is forking out public money to developers, such as the £11 million it recently gave Capital&Centric to demolish the iconic Cannon Brewery to build 500 luxury flats that we can't afford.

£500 million reserves

Sheffield council has over £500 million reserves, plus borrowing powers. These funds should be used to meet public need, not profit.

Democratically organised regular public meetings would allow working-class Sheffielders to voice their needs. And we should send the bill for public services to an incoming Keir Starmer Labour government.

Worcester – the working class is angry

CALVIN FOWLER
TUSC CANDIDATE IN ARBORETUM

I am standing as a TUSC candidate, because the Tory Party is failing us, and Labour is no real alternative. The

working class are suffering in every direction, we are paying more for less.

Decaying public services, no affordable housing – the mood of Britain's working class is angry. Workers are finding a voice with the cost-of-living crisis.

The terrible assault on Palestine by the Israeli state has angered people, as we see every Saturday afternoon on the high street in Worcester. The two main parties are not doing anything

about this, as many Palestinian civilians are starving to death in this attack.

A working-class alternative like TUSC can be part of this change.

I was on strike last May, with other Unite trade union members in our factory, for a fair pay rise. After nearly a month of striking, we got a pay deal. This shows you if the trade unions and working class work together as a collective, what can be done.

Campaigners stop Westmorland and Furness council caving in to property developers



TUSC campaigners lobby the council SOCIALIST PARTY

MARTIN POWELL-DAVIES
SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBER IN WESTMORLAND AND FURNESS

Westmorland and Furness councillors aren't used to being lobbied on their way into council meetings. But on 20 March, members of the local Trade Unionist and Socialist Party (TUSC) housing campaign were there to greet them on the steps of County Hall.

Unaffordable

As is only too typical, a local property developer was expecting the councillors to agree to set aside their own 'affordable homes' policy, and walk out of the meeting with planning agreement to build 194 new houses in Penrith, with just four of them being for 'affordable' rent.

But they hadn't reckoned with the effect of the TUSC intervention.

Allocated five minutes to speak to the meeting, I pointed to the housing crisis across Westmorland and beyond, where low-paid workers and young people are struggling to find anywhere they can afford to live.

I gave the example of a 60-year-old local shopworker, living in a tent in

the woods, because he can't afford to pay rocketing rents, yet is told by the Lib Dem council that he isn't a high enough priority to be housed.

We reminded councillors that they were meant to serve the needs of the community that elected them, not boosting the profits of property developers. We called on councillors to reject the proposal, and instead consult over how to deliver genuinely affordable, rented council housing.

The debate swung backwards and forwards as councillors wavered between the pressure from our arguments, and the council officers trying to insist that they vote through their recommendation. In the end, they agreed to defer any decision!

Small victory

It was only a small victory. But, if it wasn't for TUSC, yet another unaffordable housing development would have simply been voted through.

We're going to continue to build our campaign for genuinely affordable housing, including by standing a TUSC candidate in the council by-election in Grange and Cartmel on 2 May.

Northampton – “I’ve found my political home”



Northampton Socialist Party

We relaunched TUSC in Northampton with a public meeting. The discussion was broad and lively, from the plight of the people of Palestine, to the task of taking on the Tories at a council level. Nobody attending had any illusions that the Labour Party could be a vehicle for socialist change.

After the meeting, a leading campaigner for Palestine solidarity said:

“I’ve found my political home”, and agreed to join the local TUSC steering committee to help us build an alternative. Northampton TUSC is hoping to stand at least one candidate in the general election, and upwards of ten candidates in next year’s local council elections.

KATIE SIMPSON

NORTHAMPTON SOCIALIST PARTY

Lively National Pensioners’ Convention conference

CLARE WILKINS
SECRETARY, EAST MIDLANDS NATIONAL PENSIONERS’ CONVENTION (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

The National Pensioners’ Convention (NPC) biennial delegate conference took place on 26-27 March. There were around 100 delegates from trade unions, NPC regions, NPC Wales, and pensioner organisations and campaigns.

Since 2022, NPC has campaigned hard to keep the pension triple lock, opposed voter ID, and campaigns with Age UK, Independent Age and Ageing Better for a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing with statutory powers (as Northern Ireland and Wales already have). It also campaigns alongside Fuel Poverty Alliance and Fuel Poverty Action Group on energy issues.

A motion was carried to campaign for the unfreezing of tax thresholds. They are currently frozen till 2028 so every pension increase is taken away in tax. You currently only need to have £1,600 income and the state pension to pay tax. The Resolution

Foundation says that the Triple Lock is already almost wiped out by tax.

Motions were also carried on the National Better Buses Campaign, the regeneration of bus and train services, NHS training, against the proposal to monitor state pension and benefit recipient’s bank accounts in the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, and to set up a climate working party.

A motion calling for rights for volunteers was adopted, with the proviso that volunteers must not be used to replace paid jobs.

35 attended a fringe meeting held by the women’s working party, discussing how to get more women involved in the NPC.

The NPC punches above its weight in campaigning and media coverage. In order to continue and grow, it needs more trade union organisations and individuals to support it and for more younger pensioners to get active.

A vibrant NPC campaigning for pensioners and future pensioners is needed more than ever.

Birmingham Amazon workers step up strike

JONATHAN OSAKO AND NICK HART
BIRMINGHAM SOCIALIST PARTY

Action at Amazon’s warehouse in Minworth near Birmingham stepped up a gear on 27-28 March, with a 48-hour strike by GMB members. Birmingham Socialist Party members went to visit all four picket shifts.

The strike followed a previous 24-hour walkout there in January, and over a year of strikes at Amazon in Coventry. Many members from there came to lend their support and experience on how to organise a picket line and speak to workers to convince them not to go into work and instead join the union.

The tactic was successful, with a long queue of workers at the GMB gazebo wanting to join the union and

an even longer tailback of cars on the entry road! Union membership at the warehouse has now reached 300, up from 100 at the start of the first strike day.

Over 1,500 workers work in this newly built facility, most are immigrants who speak English as a second language. Despite the language barriers, most of the workers we spoke to are united in their grievances over pay. As one summed it up: “We keep on making Bezos richer and richer, and we keep getting poorer and poorer.”

As groceries and rent become increasingly expensive, workers struggle with their stagnant £12-an-hour pay cheque. This comes at a time when many workers have just received council tax bills from Birmingham’s Blairite council which are 10% higher than last year’s!

According to a union representative we spoke to, the company’s desperate union-busting efforts in Coventry now include putting up a QR code in the warehouse which brings you to a link to leave the union. Meanwhile at Birmingham, managers have been asking workers if they feel intimidated to join the strike. As one put it: “You’re the ones intimidating us!”

Workers also complained about managers being remote and unavailable. Workers often do not know who their manager is and struggle to find the person to make complaints to about problems in the workplace. One worker commented: “They’d be happier if we were all robots - and probably the robots would get treated better!”

We urge the workers in Amazon to join the union, and to play an active role in recruiting others and building a strike committee to strengthen the union on site. We also encourage the trade union movement to assist the GMB in spreading unionisation to other Amazon locations around the UK to force the company to recognise the union, end oppressive management, and pay a living wage.



PHOTO: BIRMINGHAM SP

Anger at Sunak and Starmer on London Gaza demo

DAVID HOFMAN
WEST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY

The UN Security Council has voted in favour of an immediate ceasefire, but the Israeli state’s attacks on Gaza continue. Thousands attended a protest again in central London on 30 March.

At Socialist Party campaign stalls along the route, discussion about politicians in Britain was dominant. Many marchers have clearly linked the identical support of both major British parties for Israel’s murderous actions in Gaza to understanding that an incoming Starmer government will pursue essentially the same policies as the Tories, in Britain and internationally.

Evidence of the widespread disgust at Starmer’s stance was that a woman living in a rural Tory constituency told us: “I’ve never voted anything but Labour. But I can’t vote Labour again. But the Tories are no better - they’ve even angered the farmers in my area!”

Our emphasis on the need for a new party that represents the 99% in Britain received widespread agreement. So did our call for a socialist intifada - a democratic mass movement - in Gaza and the West Bank. We made the case for independent working-class political organisation to challenge the ruling capitalist elites internationally, including in Israel.

One person referred to the Rochdale byelection result as ‘what’s possible’. Our proposal to co-ordinate as many independent socialist candidates as possible under the banner of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition was also well received.

Two Communication Workers Union (CWU) members were concerned about the role of the trade unions on these marches. Elaine said: “The union nationally is really quiet - the CWU should have an official presence here - we need to rock the boat!” Her partner, who is very active in the union, said that he would try to contact CWU General Secretary Dave Ward “next week to find out what he is doing about this”.



Socialist Party on the demo

Organising the trade union rank and file

Broad Left Organising Committee 40 years on

The strike wave of the last two years has taken levels of industrial action to a scale not seen since the 1980s. A new generation of trade union activists is learning through struggle, drawing lessons about how rank-and-file activists can organise to exert pressure on trade union leaders – including organising to challenge for the leaderships of unions themselves.

We republish an edited article, written in 2014 by Bill Mullins, then Socialist Party national industrial organiser, about the role of the Broad Left Organising Committee during the workers' struggles of the 1980s.

Forty years ago, a national conference took place in Sheffield organised by the Broad Left Organising Committee (Bloc). The meeting coincided with the start of the miners' strike in March 1984.

The miners' strike was a culmination of the rising tide of anger against the Margaret Thatcher government and its attacks on the trade union movement. Thatcher, the Tory prime minister, was preparing to close down the mining industry, aiming to break the powerful National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

Bloc was a formation of trade union broad lefts which had been set up earlier in response to developments in the Labour Party and the use of the trade union block vote in an undemocratic way by the right-wing trade union leaders.

At that time, many of the broad lefts were led or influenced by supporters of the Militant (the forerunner of the Socialist Party).

Militant argued that, because of the growing list of attacks on the working class and the miserable



PHOTO: DAVE SINCLAIR

leadership given by many of the trade union leaders, the time was right to re-launch Bloc as a new initiative.

The aim was to try to give a lead from below to all those ready to struggle against the Tory onslaught.

It was clear that the original aims of Bloc would need to be developed. Bloc had developed a certain authority among many trade union activists.

It needed to develop this rank-and-file organisation and, at the same time, continue to put pressure on the official trade union bodies to prepare their members for the coming struggle.

Bloc played an important role in mobilising workers behind the miners throughout their strike, including organising pickets of the power stations and a 2,000-strong lobby of the TUC conference in September 1984 to demand a 24-hour general strike to back the miners.

Bloc held tremendously important conferences and campaigns throughout the 1980s on many issues, including important international workers' struggles. Regional Bloc organisations were developed and conferences took place throughout the country. This included a London conference in October 1986 against the privatisation of Thames Water.

In April 1986, the second national Bloc conference again took place in Sheffield. The miners' strike had finished in March 1985.

The defeat of the miners affected the mood of the whole working class; nevertheless 1,800 trade union delegates were at the conference to debate the key issues of the day.

The conference was called in conjunction with the socialist-led Liverpool District Labour Party and its theme was "how to map out a strategy to defeat the witch-hunt [in the

Labour Party] and build the left."

In 1983, the Labour Party's national leaders had expelled the five members of the Militant newspaper editorial board and, in November 1985, they suspended Liverpool District Labour Party, in their drive to suppress socialist ideas.

Derek Hatton and Tony Mulhearn, Liverpool councillors who were eventually removed from office by the Tory government in 1987 along with 45 others, addressed the conference.

The Bloc conference also highlighted the battle by the South African working class against apartheid and discussed how the trade unions in Britain should aid that struggle.

The president of the South African TGWU, Jeremiah Zulu, got a standing ovation when he called for direct links between the rank and file of the trade unions in Britain and South Africa.

A special conference was held in July 1986 in Birmingham, attended by over 350 delegates. This had the theme of fighting the privatisation of the public sector which had been unleashed by the Thatcher government.

At the time, Militant supporter and now Socialist Party National Committee member Dave Nellist was the Labour MP for Coventry South East. He opened the conference by calling for the renationalisation of all privatised services and industry with one third of the management boards made up of elected representatives of workers in the industry, one third from the TUC and one third from a Labour government.

Compensation would only be paid based on proven need. The conference called for Bloc to create a health service broad left to fight NHS privatisation.

Bloc organised another conference in February 1988 which over 1,200 delegates attended, including many from the health service.

When it was planned in September 1987, nobody foresaw the explosion of strikes, ranging from the health service to Ford in Basildon and many others, that would take place leading up to the conference.

On one night shift in Manchester, 38 nurses had taken strike action in frustration at understaffing, working conditions and low pay. They then

left the RCN and joined Cohse, which later became part of Unison. The strike hit the headlines and forced the government into a U-turn. This changed the whole mood of the trade union movement.

The conference called for the TUC to organise a one-day general strike in support of the NHS and the TUC was forced – by the mood of workers – to organise a national day of action on this issue, which included strike action at local level.

Bloc's role was crucial in showing what could be done if the trade union movement got together and acted in unison.

Unfortunately, despite Bloc's growing influence, the right-wing dominance at the top of the unions effectively blocked the path to more militant action.

The right wing's policies were based on acceptance of the market and capitalism. The argument was that this required a "new realism" – in other words, unlike the 1970s when militancy was the norm which, the right wing argued, led to the Thatcher government.

By the end of the 1980s, it was clear that the period in which Bloc could play a vital role was drawing to a close. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and capitalist ideological offensive led to a fall in the political consciousness of many trade union activists.

It required new events and a new, younger layer of activists to be brought into the struggle before the human forces for any new similar organisation would be available.

Bloc's programme sought to unite all the struggles that workers were involved in. It called for:

- Regular election of all trade union officials
- Only the average workers' wage for all officials
- Opposition to all witch-hunts in the Labour Party and the unions
- Building the shop stewards' combines at local, regional, and national level
- A 35-hour week without loss of pay
- A campaign to defeat the attacks on abortion rights
- Repeal of all the anti-union laws
- Full support for health workers and for a 24-hour general strike

Need Not Greed – A collection of Alan Hardman's work

Support the Kickstarter campaign

We have been delighted with the way people have reacted to Alan's cartoons and the many warm and heartfelt responses to Alan's sad passing in January. His family are even more committed to honouring his political and artistic legacy by completing what he started and publishing a book of his cartoons.

As there are no millionaire backers for this type of socialist project it will only be achieved through solidarity from people who shared his passion and appreciated his socialist cartoons.

Therefore, we have a big favour to ask.

Please could you give one more positive response by ordering your copy of Alan's book *Need Not Greed*

today via Kickstarter, the online fundraising platform.

Your order will take us a step closer to a successful Kickstarter campaign, which is essential for the book to be printed next month. Alan's family are donating all the proceeds to the Labour and Trade Union movement. Please take a moment to place your order before the Kickstarter campaign closes at midnight Monday 8 April.

Thank you for your support and solidarity.
JON INGHAM

- Visit: [1854.photo/NeedNotGreed](https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/alan-hardman/need-not-greed) or search 'Kickstarter Alan Hardman Need Not Greed'

Alan Hardman was the first printer of *Militant* (the Socialist's predecessor), and produced hundreds of political cartoons for publication in our party publications. Sadly, Alan passed away in January. (see 'Obituary: Alan Hardman 1936-2024 Militant cartoonist and printer' at socialistparty.org.uk)



WHAT WE STAND FOR

Capitalism is an ailing, crisis-ridden system based on the exploitation of the majority of the world's population by a small, super-rich elite who own most of the wealth and the means of producing it. This way of organising society, in which the pursuit of profit comes before everything else, causes poverty, inequality, environmental destruction, wars and oppression across the globe.

The Socialist Party organises working-class people to fight against the attacks from this rotten system on our lives and livelihoods, and for a socialist alternative: a society which takes the

wealth out of the hands of the super-rich and is democratically run by working-class people to meet the needs of all not the profits of a few.

Building fighting democratic trade unions in the workplaces and a new mass workers' party is a vital part of the struggle to change society along socialist lines.

Because capitalism is a world system, the struggle for socialism must also be international. The Socialist Party is part of the Committee for a Workers' International which organises

across the world. Our demands include:

WORK, PENSIONS AND BENEFITS

- A £15-an-hour minimum wage for all, without exemptions. For the minimum wage to automatically increase linked to average earnings or inflation, whichever is higher.
- Share out the work. A maximum 32-hour working week with no loss of pay or worsening of conditions. The right to flexible working, under the control of workers not employers. An end to insecure working, for the right to full-time work for all who want it; ban zero-hour contracts.
- All workers to have trade union rates of pay, employment protection, and sickness, parental and holiday rights from day one of employment. End bosses using bogus 'self-employment' as a means to avoid giving workers rights.
- No to austerity through inflation.
- For all wage rates to be automatically increased at least in line with price rises.
- Open the books of all companies cutting jobs or claiming they can't afford to pay a real living wage. State subsidies,

where genuinely needed, for socially-useful small businesses.

- For trade unions independent of the capitalist state, with members having democratic control over their own policies, constitutions and democratic procedures. For all trade union officials to be regularly elected, subject to recall by their members and paid a worker's wage.
- Reduce the state retirement and pension age to 55. For decent living pensions.
- Replace universal credit and the punitive benefit system with living benefits for all who need them.

PUBLIC SERVICES

- A massive expansion of public services including the NHS and council services. Reverse all the cuts, kick out the privateers. Bring private social care and childcare facilities into public ownership under democratic control, in order to provide free, high-quality services for all who need them. Expand services for all women suffering violence.
- For local councillors who are committed to opposing austerity and

all cuts to local services, jobs, pay and conditions.

- For a socialist NHS to provide for everyone's health needs, including dental and eye care – free at the point of use and under democratic control. Kick out the private companies! Nationalise the pharmaceutical industry under democratic workers' control and management.
- Renationalise privatised utilities – including rail, mail, water, telecoms and power – under democratic workers' control and management.
- Free, publicly funded and democratically run, good-quality education, available to all at any age. Abolish university tuition fees and write off student debt, end marketisation, and introduce a living grant. No to academisation. For all schools to be under the genuine democratic control of local education authorities, school staff, parents and student organisations.
- The right to a safe secure home for all. For the mass building of genuinely affordable, high-quality, carbon-neutral council housing. For rent controls that cap

the level of rent. Fair rent decisions should be made by elected bodies of tenants, housing workers and representatives of trade unions. For cheap low-interest mortgages for home buyers. Nationalise the privately owned large building companies, land banks and estates.

ENVIRONMENT

- Prioritising major research and investment into replacing fossil fuels and nuclear power with renewable energy, and ending the problems of early obsolescence – where products are designed to 'wear out' and be replaced – and unrecycled waste.
- Nationalisation of the energy companies, under democratic workers' control and management, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need, in order to carry out a major switch to clean, green energy, without any loss of jobs, pay or conditions.
- A democratically planned, massively expanded, free to use, publicly owned transport system, as part of an overall plan against environmental pollution.
- For a major, publicly funded,

insulation and energy transition plan for existing housing stock.

- Agrifusiness to be taken into democratic public ownership. For a food processing and retail industry under workers' control to ensure that standards are set by consumers, small farmers, and all workers involved in the production, processing, distribution and retail of food.

DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

- For united working-class struggle to end discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, and all other forms of prejudice and oppression.
- Repeal the anti-trade union laws and all others that trample over civil liberties. For the right to protest and to strike! End police harassment. For the police to be accountable to local committees, made up of democratically elected representatives of trade unions, local community organisations and local authorities.
- For the right to choose when and whether to have children – for the right to access abortion, contraception and fertility treatment for all who need it.

and activists from workplaces, and community, environmental, anti-racist and anti-cuts campaigns, to provide a fighting, socialist political alternative to the pro-big business parties.

SOCIALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

- No to imperialist wars and occupations!
- Take the wealth off the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and the banking system that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and

management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need, not to the fat cats.

- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment.
- No to the EU bosses' club. Organise a campaign with European socialists and workers' organisations to use the talks on post-Brexit relations to tear up the EU pro-capitalist rules. For a real collaboration of the peoples of Europe on a socialist basis as a step towards a socialist world.

Do you agree? Join the fightback!

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- or call 020 8988 8777
- or text your name and postcode to 07761 818 206 to find out more today!



Austria: Communist vote grows in Salzburg elections

SOZIALISTISCHE OFFENSIVE (CWI IN AUSTRIA)

The Communist Party (KPÖ) in Austria has seen a couple of successes in local and regional elections in the last two and a half years. The first was in Graz, Austria's second-largest city, where it now holds the mayor's position, as part of a coalition with the pro-capitalist Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and Greens.

Then, in last year's regional elections in Salzburg, it received 21% of the vote in the city of Salzburg itself. That has now been topped by 23.1% in the city council elections on 10 March. On top of that, the KPÖ candidate Kay Michael Dankl reached the run-off elections for mayor with 28%, narrowly behind SPÖ candidate Benhard Auinger's 29.4%. Meanwhile, the vote share of the ruling conservative People's Party (ÖVP) has been halved, and the right-populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) only slightly increased to just over 10%.

This is all the more remarkable as the FPÖ currently leads the opinion polls nationally. There is the potential for an FPÖ-led government after the coming general election. With the Salzburg run-off election on 24 March, the EU-elections in June and a general election on 29 September, the KPÖ's result could propel discussions about Marxist ideas back into the spotlight, as had been the case since Elke Kahr's 2022 mayoral victory in Graz.

Opportunities

These results have had a big impact in Austria and give a real opportunity to begin to build a genuine socialist force in the country.

On the back of KPÖ success in the 2023 Salzburg regional elections, left winger Andreas Babler was elected chair of the SPÖ, fuelling hopes for workers' friendly politics. While Babler has since tried to present himself as trying to unite the different wings of the SPÖ, and thereby softening his previous more radical stance, the KPÖ victory could temporarily stabilise his position again. The SPÖ apparatus around Vienna's SPÖ mayor Michael Ludwig might need him as a left face.

Babler issued a press statement supporting Auinger (SPÖ), Dankl (KPÖ)'s opponent in the Salzburg mayoral run-off election. Auinger himself has already labelled the KPÖ's programme on housing (such as lowering rents) as "unrealistic".

The dynamics of the EU elections and the general election mean that the KPÖ could be propelled further into the spotlight on the back of the good result in Salzburg. The Graz result in 2022 has been labelled an 'oddy', and that Graz has always been an exception (where the KPÖ has consistently engaged in local elections, its councillors taking a worker's wage and campaigning on housing). Salzburg could have a more national impact though.

There is the potential for a left-wing force to poll well nationally. Currently the KPÖ only polls 3%, up from 0.7% in 2019. A small increase would meet the 4% threshold to enter parliament. In the meantime, the Bierpartei (Beer party), a protest



vehicle/comedy-style party, is polling 7%, pulling in protest votes. Babler's SPÖ is polling at 23%, quite a long way behind the FPÖ.

The Salzburg election was further confirmation that it is possible to beat the FPÖ with a programme that addresses social issues and people's concerns. This is also reflected in the fact that the vacuum was clearly felt in many other places in the Salzburg region where the KPÖ did not run and where the FPÖ was able to make gains.

The KPÖ won votes primarily with its housing policy in times of inflation. Dankl in Salzburg has placed even more emphasis than Kahr in Graz on presenting himself as a 'nice communist from next door'. He has made it clear that the KPÖ relies on a 'social-work approach' instead of organising and mobilising people who are unhappy about social conditions.

Dankl is unlikely to win the run-off election for the mayor's seat. But a good result would be a strong signal, not just for Salzburg, but for Austria as a whole. That is why Sozialistische Offensive is calling for a vote for Dankl in the run-off election, with a warning: without a majority in the local council, the pressure for a coalition or political agreement with pro-capitalist parties such as the Greens or the SPÖ would be even greater than it already is. And, without a movement

behind him, the pressure on Dankl to adapt will be enormous.

'Young Left'

The KPÖ youth organisation Junge Linke (Young Left), and Dankl himself, originally come from the Greens. In 2017, the Green Party kicked out its youth organisation Junge Grüne, which renamed itself Junge Linke and joined the KPÖ after Graz's victory. This is the reason for the plus in KPÖ+, the party's campaigning banner.

However, in Salzburg the KPÖ+ has even fewer roots in the trade unions and workplaces than in Graz. The KPÖ+ now has an important responsibility: if it disappoints and doesn't meet the expectations placed in it, it can lose votes again and the FPÖ can gain ground once more.

Particularly in view of the global crisis and the escalating contradictions of capitalism, a socialist programme and a movement that fights for the KPÖ's demands, such as decent and cheap public housing, is needed. With its now ten Salzburg council seats, the KPÖ+ should not enter into coalitions with the SPÖ and the Greens. Should Dankl win the run-off, the KPÖ+ should decide on how it will vote on every individual issue.

The KPÖ should propose points of its programme for implementation and thus force the other parties' hands. At the same time, it should mobilise those affected to exert

pressure for public housing, a reduction in rents, expansion of public transport, an increase in minimum income, etc.

Babler's election, along with the growth in support for the KPÖ+ and the Bierpartei, are an expression of the search for a political alternative - and they will be tested out in practice. The KPÖ+ must seize this opportunity and make an offer to the unorganised, activists from struggles, supporters of Babler and activists of the Bierpartei. The SPÖ is still dominated by pro-capitalists and has lost a significant amount of its working-class roots. What is needed is a workers' party in which working people, young people, the unemployed and pensioners can organise themselves. But one that also has space for organisations and that can organise and coordinate struggles, and be a place where the programme, demands and methods are discussed.

An important next step would be a joint activist conference of KPÖ, Babler supporters, activists from class struggles, and activists from the Beer Party, where joint action can be discussed and decided. This could include: no support for coalitions with pro-capitalist parties, joint campaigns such as on affordable housing, building links and campaigning on trade union and workplace issues, building a movement and resistance to possible attacks by a new government after the national elections etc.

Members of Sozialistische Offensive in Salzburg have supported a vote for KPÖ+ and Dankl in Salzburg but also fight to build a workers' party that has a clear socialist programme. Campaigning on the weekend of the election in Salzburg, it was clear that the Salzburg city elections took place at a time of increased class struggle, with German trains running late because of the German train drivers' strike and Austrian delivery workers striking either side of the elections. The polarisation between rich and poor is becoming more pronounced and social and workplace issues sharper. We found Austrian rail workers were discussing shortage of staff on the trains. Later in the evening, we held a meeting that discussed our proposals on what the KPÖ should do next to build a movement after its election success.

Regardless of the outcome of the run-off election, the KPÖ+ must use its positions both as a campaigning platform on immediate issues and to promote a socialist programme, and explain what real socialism could look like. A break with capitalism and the transfer of key enterprises into public ownership under the democratic control of the working people is necessary to solve the problems that capitalism creates. Without such a socialist programme, there is a danger of missing opportunities and repeating, albeit on a smaller scale, the mistakes of parties like the SPÖ, which merely administer capitalism, abandon their supporters in times of crisis and massively lose support as a result or even collapse.

● This article was written before the result of the Salzburg mayor election run-off in which SPÖ candidate Benhard Auinger came out on top

Dankl (left) and Auinger (right), Communist and Social Democrat, go head to head in a run-off for Salzburg mayor on 24 March

FSI - COMMUNITY TV/CC

US: Freighter collision collapses Francis Scott Key Bridge



Fight for workers' safety and job security

JACOB BIELSKI AND CLAIRE BAYLER (FORMER BALTIMORE DOCKHAND)
INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST GROUP USA

On 26 March, the Dali, a 985-foot-long cargo ship, collided with and destroyed the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which spans the outer Baltimore Harbor in Maryland. Authorities shut down traffic after hearing the ship's mayday calls, but eight maintenance workers on break in their vehicles were left on the 1.6-mile-long bridge. Two survived, two were found dead, and the remaining four are missing and presumed dead.

While the exact causes of the ship's loss of power, and subsequent steering control, are under investigation, one suspected cause is an industry 'dirty open secret': contaminated fuel. Fuel contamination, which poses risks to both worker safety and the environment, is often due to lax oversight, but deliberate dilution by providers does occur.

The supply chain is "maddeningly opaque" and regulation rare. Working-class people must demand compensation for the families of workers injured and killed by the disaster, as well as government relief for workers affected by the Port of Baltimore shutting down. The cost of relief efforts and rebuilding should be taken from the pockets of the corporations, not working people.

The port directly supports more than 15,000 jobs, with an additional 140,000 jobs dependent on port activity overall. 2,400 members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) are soon to be out of work. The local union president described the jobs as, "very good and family sustaining" but "daily hire" with no guarantee of work. The Maryland Department of Labor has set up a dedicated unemployment line for affected workers, and the Maryland Senate president, Senator Bill Ferguson, promised to sponsor emergency legislation to provide income replacement. Similar promises were

made in the wake of disasters like the Flint, Michigan water crisis and East Palestine, Ohio train derailment but failed to materialise.

The union, Baltimore's working class, and the labour movement nationwide will need to mobilise mass pressure on the state and federal government to ensure relief efforts actually happen, are timely, and fully meet workers' needs.

The closure of the ninth-largest US port (by volume) is estimated to cost \$191 million a day in lost economic activity. It handles imported and exported cargo ranging from automobiles, machinery, agricultural equipment, liquified natural gas, coal, and sugar; is a launching point for cruise liners; and is a hub for freight, rail, and trucking. While most cargo types can be rerouted, the US coal industry, for example, will likely see greater disruption as exports require specialised port infrastructure.

During the pandemic, severely understaffed ports highlighted the ripple effect of disruptions like the Ever Given ship running aground in the Suez Canal. The impacts on vulnerable global supply chains are exacerbated by deferred maintenance, 'lean' operations with no redundancy, and minimal investment in infrastructure or equipment by both corporations and governments.

The Key Bridge, built in 1977, lacked modern protections for the bridge supports, which were not built to withstand the impact of today's larger and faster cargo vessels. Since the Panama Canal was expanded in 2016, Baltimore's shipping channel handles some of the world's largest cargo ships, though the Dali is classified "mid-sized". One civil engineer called it "an accident waiting to happen" and estimates it will take months to remove the debris and re-open the shipping channel. Maryland is to receive \$60 million in initial emergency relief funding from the federal government to cover "mobilisation, operations, and debris recovery."

While port operations are the economic engine of Baltimore, the Key Bridge itself was used by 30,000 people every day. President Biden pledged the federal government would foot the bill to repair the bridge. Such projects typically take a decade to complete, with securing funds the most time-consuming stage. At breakneck speed, the bridge would still likely require two-and-a-half years to reopen. The Key Bridge, instead of another tunnel, was originally built because of the need to carry hazardous materials around and through Baltimore.

Cost cutting

Lapses in maintenance, understaffing, and inadequate safety regulations - often the result of private companies trying to cut costs and increase their profits - are common causes of logistics and industrial disasters. Workers pay with their lives. The New York Times reports that the Dali "had a deficiency related to 'propulsion and auxiliary machinery,'" noted during an inspection in Chile on 27 June 2023. The US Coast Guard did investigate the ship in September, but staffing issues have affected the frequency and thoroughness of inspections. Sal Mercogliano, a professor at the US Merchant Marine academy, raises concerns that vessels are not inspected as regularly as needed and ships are not under obligation at times to report problems.

The labour movement in Maryland and around the country should unite to demand answers to the disaster. The Key Bridge collapse is one high-profile example of incidents that happen systematically under capitalism. In the short term, public pressure

could win relief for workers and families affected by the bridge collapse and the port shutdown. Maritime and logistics unions in Baltimore need to mobilise their membership and the broader working-class community. Additionally, a mass movement of transportation workers - whether they work on the rails, seas, roads, or skies - and community members should demand public spending to update infrastructure and safety standards, regulating the industry to prioritise workers' lives over company profits.

Corporations and both corporate political parties have undermined and overturned regulations for safe working conditions for decades. Unions have been on the back foot, largely failing to defend working and living conditions. The labour movement can win better safety laws, real enforcement, and funds for infrastructure and equipment maintenance and updates by mobilising in workplaces and in the streets. The labour movement can fight to overturn anti-worker laws and win greater legal rights and protections by breaking from the Democrats and Republicans and running its own independent candidates.

These candidates could be a step towards building a new party for working-class people that can organise mass struggle for better wages and hours, public infrastructure, transit, and housing programmes, universal healthcare, environmental protections, and more. Such demands could help prevent, mitigate, and respond to disasters - whether man-made or natural. Additionally, workers and unions should call for the major logistics companies to be taken into public ownership, under democratic control by workers and communities, in order to create an industry where workers' safety and efficient movement of critical goods take priority over the profits of capitalist shareholders.



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the Socialist

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RENATIONALISE RAIL



GEOFF SHEPPARD/CC

Support striking train drivers

RYAN ALDRED
SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Train drivers, members of Aslef, are taking industrial action again, as the Tories show their determination not to listen to workers or sense!

The dispute, ongoing since June 2022, has seen 14 days of nationwide strike action, followed by rolling strikes, staggered across the different Train Operating Companies (TOCs).

The latest in a rolling stock of transport secretaries, Mark Harper, has refused to even speak with the union since December 2022. All workers want is a decent pay offer without having to accept a bonfire of terms and conditions.

Meanwhile, rail users have a raw deal of their own. Britain already has the highest train fares in Europe, but that hasn't stopped bosses putting them up a further 4.9% this year! At a time when people have already been hammered by the effects of inflation and a cost-of-living crisis, these fare hikes feel like a squeeze too far.

But at least the railways are operating smoothly, right? Wrong! Since 2018, five rail operators have already effectively been taken back into a form of public ownership. It is abundantly clear that privatised rail doesn't work.

Labour leader Keir Starmer said of the railways back in July 2022: "The answer is going to lie in regulating the market, changing the



PAUL MATSSON

market, rather than simply taking things into public ownership."

More recently, Louise Haigh, shadow transport secretary, said Labour would renationalise rail within its first term of government.

The last Labour government failed to deliver rail renationalisation, despite Tony Blair promising it before being elected. And Starmer already has a record of U-turns and backtracking, before even taking office!

The rail industry could be brought into public ownership immediately, with compensation only where there is proven need - and with fares frozen and rail unions' terms met in full. Aslef, which is a Labour-affiliated union, should be demanding Labour takes this stance. And be prepared to back candidates who do support its members and policies, even if that means backing candidates independently of Labour.

By introducing genuine working-class democratic control and management of a renationalised rail industry, investment could be planned to increase capacity and improve services. That is what the Socialist Party fights for, as part of a wider socialist planned economy.

• Aslef members will strike across different TOCs on 5, 6 and 8 April. In addition, there will be an overtime ban from 4-6 and 8-9 April. Aslef drivers on London Underground will strike for 24 hours on 8 April and 4 May

WHAT WE STAND FOR: THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S MAIN DEMANDS >>> see column on p12-13



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