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the Socialist

Issue 1310

20-26 February 2025

formerly **Militant**

FUND SERVICES NOT WAR

Fight for socialist change

Hundreds of thousands killed, many more injured, and millions forced to flee their homes.

That is the reality of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East for working-class and poor people.

But for the super-rich bosses and capitalist politicians, war is a means

by which to defend and extend influence and power - looking after their own profit interests.

There are some who are doing very well indeed in this increasingly volatile and conflict-ridden world. Stocks in Britain's big weapons manufacturers soared after Keir Starmer said he would be willing to deploy British troops in Ukraine. BAE Systems, one of the biggest, has more than doubled its share price since Putin invaded Ukraine three years ago.

Investors clearly expect military

spending to continue to rise. Meanwhile, Keir Starmer tells us we can't afford decent services, council tax needs to be increased, and health workers and others can't have a decent pay rise.

Starmer

Starmer is committed to trying to look after the interests of Britain's capitalist bosses. That is what is behind his willingness to send troops to Ukraine, not his concern for ordinary Ukrainians. It is also what is behind his

continued austerity cutbacks at home.

But the wealth is there to fund our services. As the numbers suffering the consequences of war worldwide increase, so does the number of billionaires.

The working class needs its own mass party. One that will fully fund services and make the super-rich pay. One that can act in genuine working-class solidarity with the masses around the world to end capitalist wars. One that fights for socialist change.

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Friday before publication, or Monday morning for urgent news, unless otherwise agreed with the editors.

The Socialist goes to press on a Tuesday night. We publish online on Wednesday and in print on Thursday.

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SOCIALIST PARTY

The Socialist is the weekly newspaper of the Socialist Party, the England and Wales section of the Committee for a Workers' International socialistparty.org.uk socialistworld.net



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Left Books: Marxist classics bookshop leftbooks.co.uk

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ISSN 1366-9621

Published by Socialist Publications, PO Box 1398, Enfield EN1 9GT
Registered as a newspaper at the Post Office
Printed by trade union labour at Reach Printing Services

Militant issue 1: October 1964
The Socialist issue 1: 7 February 1997

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."
Karl Marx

Free, public dental care for all!

EOIN WILLIAMS
CAMDEN AND HARINGEY SOCIALIST PARTY

Almost since its inception, dental care provided by the NHS has been under threat. Only one year after the creation of the NHS in 1948, the then Labour government introduced fees for dental prescriptions. Later in 1951, charges for dentures were introduced. This trend of slowly privatising NHS dental care has continued until today where, under a new Labour government, British dentistry is at its closest to breaking point in history.

Caps on NHS charges are insufficient to cover costs of contemporary dental care, with NHS dentists losing, on average, £42.60 every time they fix dentures. Such shortfalls force dentists to subsidise NHS work with funds from private treatments, up to £332 million a year. "This service is running on empty, kept afloat by private work and goodwill, which is now in very short supply" said Shiv Pabary, chair of the British Dental Association's general dental practice committee.

Many dentists, frustrated at insufficient

funding, are going private. Consequently, there is a substantial shortage of NHS dentists, producing what have been dubbed 'dental deserts'. These are large areas without an NHS dentist and illustrate the increasing difficulty in accessing affordable dental care.

To solve the dental health crisis we need to fully nationalise the NHS and all its services. This includes providing all NHS dentists with the full funding required to treat NHS patients and for dental procedures to be free at the point of use.

Labour health secretary Wes Streeting has pledged 700,000 extra NHS appointments per year, with more involvement from private health vultures. While wedded to the markets' 'fiscal responsibility' and leaving the wealth of the bosses untouched, the prescription from the new Labour government won't fill the cavities of the dental system. A new mass workers' party, armed with a socialist programme, would kick out private profit from our health system and bring dentistry under a democratically planned and fully resourced health service.



AstraZeneca scraps vaccine plant, demands higher subsidies

DEAN YOUNG
LIVERPOOL SOCIALIST PARTY

AstraZeneca has announced the scrapping of a £450 million plan to build a new vaccine plant in Merseyside. It says this is because Keir Starmer's Labour government wouldn't grant it a large enough subsidy to continue. Considering AstraZeneca made \$6.5 billion in profits in 2024, surely it isn't strapped for cash!

Former Tory chancellor Jeremy Hunt, rarely quoted in The Socialist, called the lack of investment from the Starmer government "penny pinching", ironic given his austerity credentials.

What can be seen in this story is two key things. Firstly, despite Starmer's government promising 'change' and investment to grow the economy, it can't provide incentives big enough to convince large corporations to do so. However, the second key thing is that it shows the unwillingness of large corporations, and therefore capitalism generally, to invest in their productive capacity and provide jobs without governments massively subsidising them.

As short-term profits are prioritised, big business increasingly relies on our tax money via subsidies to avoid putting its own revenue into projects to expand its productive forces. Yet taxpayers have no say about projects when they are built using our money to line the pockets of shareholders - such is the 'democracy' we live in.

The solution in Merseyside as in any other area of the country (or indeed the world) is not having to rely on a government of big business to fund big business. We need a society run in the interests of the working class, by the working class. Taking the wealth and resources out of the hands of the bosses, we could democratically plan production for what we need not what makes profits for a few. A nationalised pharmaceutical industry wouldn't have to beg for subsidies to expand vaccine production but would be run by workers ourselves, and we all would reap the rewards.

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WHAT WE THINK

Keir Starmer is reported to have overruled chancellor Rachel Reeves to demand more public spending. But not on the NHS, education or housing. Starmer wants to ensure that Britain's military expenditure - already the fifth highest in the world - increases even further.

Starmer has also rushed to volunteer to put "British boots on the ground" in Ukraine as part of a possible future 'peace' deal. It could not be clearer, however, that Starmer's motivation has nothing to do with the best interests of Ukraine's population. This offer is the latest in the government's shameless contortions as it attempts to cosy up to the new US president, Donald Trump.

Trump's blunt announcement of his ninety-minute phone call with Russian president Vladimir Putin, and the start of talks between Russia and the US without the participation of either Ukraine or any of the EU powers, has sent shockwaves through Europe. Simultaneously Pete Hegseth, the US defence secretary, told NATO that Ukraine would never be able to join the military alliance and ruled out US troops being involved in enforcing any 'peace deal'. Then, Trump waded in again to suggest that Ukraine should hand over 50% ownership of its critical minerals in return for US aid.

A bridge too far?

Starmer argues that Britain can snuggle up to Trump and thereby act as a bridge between US imperialism and the EU. This is completely utopian. Far from being able to bring the sides together, Britain - an increasingly puny power, outside of all the major trading blocs - is going to face multiple insoluble problems as it tries to balance between the bigger players in this world of disorder and increasing national conflict.

Trump's highly transactional, crude 'America First' approach is rapidly increasing the instability of global capitalism today. Of course, Joe Biden's presidency also ruthlessly defended the interests of US capitalism, including by arming the Israeli government's murderous assault on the Palestinians and Lebanese. However, whereas as Biden continued to work - in part at least - through US dominance of the existing crumbling international 'rules-based order', Trump has shown himself prepared to not only bypass existing institutions but to attack them. US Vice President JD Vance's broadside against European governments was one indication of that. At the same time, Trump is willing to try and pull Putin's Russia into the US orbit.

Ultimately, Trump's approach reflects that US capitalism is no longer able to dictate the global framework it operates in and is now increasingly compelled to retreat to protect its national interests against its rivals, above all China. Trump's 'America First' approach is both a reflection and an accelerator of the multipolar character of world relations. Capitalist opponents of Trump are frightened by his preparedness

No trust in Trump, Starmer or any of the capitalist warmongers!

Fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism and war



OLEKSIV MAZEPA / ARMYINFORM.UK
PARLIAMENT, WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM,
PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE, US PRESIDENT/CC

to rip up the old international order through which the US capitalist class has ruled. But in opposing Trump we do not give one iota of support for that supposed 'world order' which has presided over increasing climate catastrophe and war, not least the horrors of the last three years in Ukraine.

In reality, US imperialism under Biden, having first offered to airlift Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky out of Kyiv when the war began, recognised that the determination of the Ukrainian population to fight for their own national rights offered an opportunity to undermine Putin's Russia and to degrade its military capacity. Therefore, for its own cynical reasons, the US provided advanced weaponry to the Ukrainian forces as have, to a lesser degree, other Western powers. The US also provided around \$60 billion to help prop up Ukraine's stricken economy.

These were not gifts, however. While \$4.7 billion was written off in November 2024, the vast majority of US support has taken the form of loans to be repaid at some future point. So, while under Biden there were not crude demands for ownership of rare minerals announced at press conferences, the reality was little different. Nor was NATO membership for Ukraine ever concretely on offer under Biden, but rather raised as an aspiration for a hazy future date. And while the Democrat administration was always careful to pay lip service to Ukraine's right to decide about negotiations with Russia, it is clear that they were

preparing to try and reach a settlement had Kamala Harris won the presidency.

Putin's confidence to invade Ukraine three years ago was one symptom of the increasingly multipolar character of the world. Back then, faced with a horrific military attack, it was inevitable that many workers in Ukraine looked towards US imperialism and the West for some protection. As the war began we warned, however, that "as the working class of Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine and many other countries can attest, none of the major capitalist powers offer any real way forward, and all are prepared to trample over national democratic rights when it suits their interests to do so." Three years of brutal trench war, with frontlines static for months at a time, have led to appalling levels of death and injury but have resolved nothing. The estimated casualty toll is at least 370,000 for Ukraine and 600,000 for Russia.

Lessons for the working class

It could not be clearer that capitalism means war. The response of Starmer, along with all other capitalist governments, to the increasingly unstable global situation is to ratchet up military spending, while trying to make the working class pay for that via further cuts to public services.

What lessons should the workers' movement learn? Our starting point has to be no trust in any of the capitalist politicians - not in Trump or Starmer, Putin or Zelensky. Along with the nightmare being suffered

by the Palestinians, the horror of the war in Ukraine throws into high relief the need - in the US, Britain, Russia, Ukraine and every country - for the working class to have its own parties, independent of all the rotten capitalist elites. Such parties need to fight for power to be taken out of the hands of the major corporations and banks that dominate the economy, so society can be run democratically in the interests of the majority, based on planning and cooperation, instead of capitalism's ruthless pursuit of profit which leads to poverty, environmental destruction, and war.

In all countries, workers' parties need to be built on the basis of defending the national rights of all peoples. In Ukraine, clearly the starting point has to be to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops and the right of the Ukrainian peoples to determine their own future. However, it would also include the rights of the peoples of Crimea, and the statelets of Donetsk and Luhansk, to democratically decide their future, including independence should they so wish it - with guaranteed rights for minorities.

Had mass workers' organisations with this approach existed in Ukraine at the start of the war it could have had a real effect on how events developed. Such organisations would have been in opposition to the pro-capitalist Zelensky government which, prior to the Russian invasion, continued the bombing of Donetsk and Luhansk and banned the Russian language in schools. This was cynically used by Putin - who in reality

cares nothing about the rights of minorities in Ukraine - to justify the invasion. In the first days of the war, a class appeal to Russian soldiers 'to go home and throw out Putin who has sent you here under false pretences, and leave us to build a movement against our own oligarchs', would have been very powerful.

However, that was not how events developed. Over the last three years the suffering of the Ukrainian masses, and the death toll of Russian soldiers, has been horrendous. At this stage, the killing continues. However, while it is not certain how events will develop, some kind of alleged 'peace deal', in reality more akin to a frozen conflict, is on the cards at a certain stage. That may give a certain breathing space for the Ukrainian working class, after all it has endured, to begin strengthening its independent organisations - armed with a socialist programme - as the only way out of the nightmare of capitalist war. The best solidarity the working class in Britain can provide is to urgently turn to the same task.

Join the fightback

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Labour mimics Reform – neither have solutions for working-class communities

GARETH BROMHALL
SWANSEA AND WEST WALES SOCIALIST PARTY

Keir Starmer's Labour Party, in Wales and across the UK, is in crisis. It has lost a member every ten minutes after last year's election.

Anger over the two-child benefit cap, the scrapping of winter fuel payments, changes to inheritance tax rules involving farmers, and the government's continued role in the war on Gaza has erupted into protest.

The 2.8% public sector pay offer and the ongoing appeasement of Trump in order to preserve the ever-fragile 'special relationship' mean more working-class ire directed at the government is on the horizon.

Meanwhile, after the Tories' electoral collapse, cost-of-living crisis and lack of a mass working-class alternative, Nigel Farage and Reform are making hay. Recent polls have put Reform ahead of both Labour and the Tories for the first time.

But Reform doesn't offer an alternative that will solve the issues working-class people face. It is in favour of more NHS privatisation, zero-hour contracts and allowing bosses to fire and rehire workers on

worse conditions. And it is against the right for workers to organise in trade unions. By pitching workers against each other, it tries to weaken the united struggle of the working class against the bosses' interests

Reform councillor

Thursday 13 February saw the first directly elected Reform councillor in Wales, elected with 47% of the vote. It is being treated by many as a 'canary in the mine' in relation to Reform's position ahead of next years Senedd (Welsh parliament) elections.

There are many reasons why voters are abandoning Labour: cost of living, winter fuel allowance cuts, lack of improvement in public services and broken promises, all come above immigration which came eighth in a recent poll.

This hasn't stopped them ramping up anti-migrant rhetoric. Recent social media ads, in Reform's iconic teal branding (right) - have been put out by the Labour Party with the message "LABOUR HITS FIVE YEAR HIGH IN MIGRANT REMOVALS" coating themselves in not just the rhetoric but also the livery of the far-right.

The way to cut across support for Reform, and the populist right in general, is not to parrot their policies or legitimise their divisive politics. Starmer is attacking migrants while the system he defends means worsening living standards for us all.

What is needed is a mass working-class party, backed by the trade

unions and with a socialist programme that offers a genuine alternative - nationalisation, fully funded NHS and council services, better pay and conditions, investment in infrastructure and education, and a mass council house building programme.

A stark contrast to what is currently on offer from all main parties

including Reform. We need jobs, homes and services for all, not racism.



TUSC AGAINST CUTS

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, which the Socialist Party takes part in, is planning to stand candidates in the upcoming local elections. Candidates will stand on a platform opposed to all cuts and any attempts by bosses and politicians to divide the working class. If you want to stand as an alternative to the pro-austerity parties, applications can be found on www.tusc.org.uk

Starmer's cuts likely to force school redundancies

DAN WARRINGTON
SURREY NEU DISTRICT MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY,
PERSONAL CAPACITY

Schools across England and Wales face redundancies as a result of a continuation of Tory austerity by Keir Starmer's Labour government.

The National Education Union (NEU) estimates that school costs will rise by 3.4% next year, costing £700 million. Yet the government has declared its intention to make schools fund next September's teacher pay rise of 2.8% from their existing budgets. The NEU estimates that 76% of primary schools and 94% of secondary schools will not be able to cover their costs for the next academic year.

After 14 years of Tory austerity, many schools have nothing left to cut other than staffing levels, as a survey of primary schools in Calderdale, which was leaked to the Observer, showed. Of the schools surveyed, more than 70% planned to make support staff redundant and more than half were planning teacher redundancies. If Labour's plan to impose further austerity comes to fruition, we will see schools across the country faced with the same decisions.

Schools have seen their funding squeezed for years, while at the same time picking up the social consequences of local services being laid to waste. Education workers now not only educate, but also act

as quasi-social workers and mental health first aiders, all with scant training and fewer resources than 15 years ago. The result is a teaching profession so overworked it is unable to replace its own losses, so that many schools now rely on recruiting overseas staff just to keep classes open.

Many education workers were hopeful that the Labour government would bring increased funding and roll back the worst effects of Tory austerity. However, Starmer and Rachel Reeves have shown themselves wedded to pro-capitalist policies. The result, if not fought, will be public services, including schools, coming ever closer to collapse.

Industrial action is inevitable in the coming months. Local strike action is taking place in several schools already, but to take on the government needs a national campaign.

Vote for action in indicative ballot

The NEU is holding an indicative ballot to take action against the unfunded pay award. This is a positive first step, but at the same time the NEU leadership has entered into a partnership agreement, 'Improving Education Together', with the government and education employers. Union members facing redundancy

in the coming months will no doubt question the commitment of union leaders expected to lead strike action against the government one day and work as partners with them the next.

There are many within the NEU leadership who see their role in this dispute as 'saving Labour from itself'. Yet it has been clear from the outset that Starmer's Labour won't do what workers desperately need and we need to fight for it. That should include the NEU contacting independent and pro-worker MPs to establish a bloc in parliament that will fight for NEU policies – an important step to establishing a new workers' party on a platform of renationalising and rebuilding our services.

Dan is one of four Socialist Party members seeking nomination to stand for the NEU Executive Committee:

- Sheila Caffrey District 12 standing for re-election
- Louise Cuffaro District 16 standing for re-election
- Sean McCauley District 8
- Dan Warrington District 11

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CRACKS BEGINNING TO SHOW FOR STARMER'S LABOUR

Socialist Party WHAT WE THINK

Keir Starmer's New Labour government has only reached its eighth month in office but the cracks are beginning to show around numerous issues, including oil field licensing, foreign policy, and Starmer's increasingly strident anti-migrant rhetoric. The latest 'nuanced' differences have been over the Employment Rights Bill, with Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner wanting the promised workers' reforms to be 'ringfenced', mealy and inadequate as they are. At the same time, business secretary Jonathan Reynolds reportedly wants to 'give companies time to get ready' for them.

At last September's TUC (Trades Union Congress), Starmer called on the trade union leaders to accept 'partnership' between unions and bosses. But the Socialist Party warned: "Starmer is clear: he accepts the limitations of the sick state of British capitalism, including Tory spending plans, and is trying to neuter the workers' movement by advocating partnership between unions and rabid big-business bosses."

There can be no common interest between workers and their unions with the bosses. Or rather, any partnership will be in the interests of the employers, particularly during this period of capitalist economic crisis.

Creaking British capitalism

If anything, the sickness of British capitalism has become even clearer over the last few months, as economic growth continues to creak along at stagnation levels or worse. This is the root of the pressures that are mounting from every angle on Starmer.

The inherent weakness of British capitalism has been further revealed by the response to Trump's volley of announcements. As the capitalists' faithful helmsman, Starmer is

attempting to balance between the competing powers of the US, China and the EU, at this stage trying to manoeuvre the UK into a favourable position with the US, explaining his fawning behaviour with Trump.

At both home and abroad, Starmer and his government faithfully represent the interests of big business. The capitalist class hopes that this New Labour government will be more effective than the Tories in implementing a new round of austerity, helped by trade union leaders arguing that it represents their members' interests. The most farsighted capitalists see the Employment Rights Bill as a necessary concession in order to try and maintain this fiction. Yet still, Reynolds looks to water down the Bill under pressure from some employers. He has done nothing to stop the closures of the Tata steelworks in Port Talbot last year, and now the Stellantis van plant in Luton. Both should be nationalised to save jobs and working-class communities.

Fiscal straitjacket

Starmer and chancellor Rachel Reeves had already committed themselves to adhering to Tory spending limits when entering Downing Street. As economic ill-winds strengthen, the official 'Office for Budget Responsibility' forecast and accompanying spring statement scheduled for 26 March will set out a so-called spending envelope. And the accompanying cuts announced in the spending review in the summer.

Budget pressures are increasing throughout the public sector on the back of 14 years of brutal Tory austerity – from the NHS, councils and now a growing funding crisis in higher education, which college workers and students are fighting.

Also, straight after the election, Starmer looked to end the public sector pay disputes that workers fought against the Tories. Labour tabled offers of around 5 to 5.5% - slightly over the more real RPI inflation rate but nowhere near recovering what has been lost since 2010. With the connivance of most of the union leaders, the majority of disputes were settled. But as we said at the time, this would



Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner
SIMON DAWSON / NO 10 DOWNING STREET/CC



A militant industrial strategy across the unions is needed now to confront Starmer's New Labour austerity offensive. But this will require a struggle in the unions against those leaders who want to cover for Labour

be as good as it would get. The offers for the new pay year are only based around 2.8%.

Reeves made it clear that last year's pay offers were governed by New Labour's concerns about workers' struggle, particularly the strike wave of the last few years, the biggest, sustained level of strike action for over three decades. And a militant industrial strategy across the unions is needed now to confront Starmer's New Labour austerity offensive. But this will require a struggle in the unions against those leaders who want to cover for Labour, including signing up to their 'partnership' agenda. This requires the building of broad lefts in the unions, and voting for fighting candidates in key union elections over the next few months.

Danger of political vacuum

But this struggle in the unions can't be limited to just the industrial plane, as essential as that is. Starmer's New Labour has opened up a political vacuum as working-class people are repelled by his pro-business policies.

Nigel Farage and his right-wing populist Reform UK are moving to exploit this mood. Starmer's response is to steer his New Labour further to the right, shamefully wearing Reform's clothes by proclaiming to be tough on migrants, and outrageously agreeing with new Tory leader Kemi Badenoch over attacking a judge's decision to use the Ukraine sanctuary scheme to allow a Palestinian family of six to flee the Israeli assault on Gaza.

But we don't share the fatalistic pessimism of many of those on the left, who have already drawn the conclusion that there is an inexorable

slide towards racist reaction, without workers' struggle. The strike wave showed that workers are prepared to fight on the picket lines.

And during that upsurge in strikes, union leaders like Mick Lynch, RMT, and Dave Ward, CWU, who were heading key national disputes, launched 'Enough is Enough', which attracted over half a million supporters and big rallies around the country, showing the potential for a trade union-based party on a pro-worker political programme.

That opportunity was deliberately not taken. But such a party now would be increasingly attractive to all those repelled by Starmer, as an alternative to Farage's Reform. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour won up to a million votes from UKIP in the 2017 general election, and won over 3 million more votes than Starmer last July.

Four of the 'suspended seven' Labour MPs who had the whip withdrawn for voting against the two-child benefit cap have been readmitted over six months later. Three remain suspended. What others will be compelled to vote against further austerity measures coming down the tracks and face Starmer's punishment?

Corbyn, the independent MPs and the three suspended Labour MPs could play an important role now, by giving workers' struggles a voice in Parliament. This would give a hint of what is possible in terms of workers' much-needed political representation.

The struggle in the workers' movement for a militant industrial struggle along with a political voice are essential tasks in the stormy period that is under way.



Striking teachers outside the
Department of Education JAMES IEVENS



Protester joins 'Enough is Enough'
march in Brighton BRIGHTON SP

UNISON

Higher education
Unison members
ballot for action

MARY FINCH
UNISON MEMBER, PERSONAL CAPACITY

Unison members in higher education (HE) are now in our third year of fighting for better pay. Strike action at 16 universities in 2022 won an increased pay offer in the middle of the cost-of-living crisis. After another paltry increase for 2025, Unison is balloting for action again.

The university employers' association UCEA claims it can only afford between 2.5% and 5.7%, with the lowest-paid workers given the highest uplift.

Universities are indeed facing a cash-flow crisis: Tory and now Labour governments have starved universities of public funding, forcing them to rely particularly on exploitative fees from international students to survive.

Now the bubble is about to burst, and workers will suffer the consequences. Cardiff University has announced 400 academic jobs will be cut and entire courses closed. Without determined and united strike action, this will be repeated across the entire sector.

The lecturers' University and College Union (UCU) and Unison together have enormous industrial power. Unison represents workers from every area of universities, from security and cleaning to admissions and exams. Joint strike action between both unions could shut down entire campuses - not just teaching and research.

This austerity-driven Labour government has no solutions - only a united movement of workers and students can win the changes necessary to save universities. That would mean scrapping all tuition fees, giving all workers a real pay rise, and providing full public funding for education.

Unison women's conference
angry at Tory austerity
continued by Labour

SOCIALIST PARTY DELEGATES

Hundreds of women activists from across the country gathered in Edinburgh for public sector union Unison's national women's conference.

This was clearly seen as an opportunity to vent anger at the devastation that 14 years of Tory brutal austerity has meant for working-class women. It's women who have so often had to pick up the pieces of failing public services to take care of those that fall through the cracks, the young, the sick and the elderly.

Over 80% of members identify as women so Unison should be the union at the forefront of fighting for equality and against the cost-of-living crisis.

A range of issues in the workplace were discussed, particularly sexual harassment, women's safety and the menopause. It was agreed that reps had to fight for policies that would fundamentally change working conditions.

Inequality

We also discussed health and mental health inequality. Women's health needs are often treated as less important, or defined in terms of how conditions present in the male population. This means, for example, far more women will die from heart attacks because their symptoms aren't recognised.

Low pay came up again and again because it affects every aspect of our lives, access to quality housing, decent childcare, public transport and domestic violence services. The gender pay gap was put into context of the greater pay gap for Black women and LGBTQ+ women, and the extra burdens and discrimination they suffer.

We also put Trans rights firmly on the agenda as a trade union issue and, despite some protesters outside, passed motions unanimously. Importantly, we discussed the impact

of the far-right on Black women in particular and how we can combat reactionary ideas.

Fighting spirit

The contributions from the floor demonstrated a real fighting spirit and some excellent young reps speaking. The supportive atmosphere was encouraging but there was not a single motion that delegates could disagree on. Motions described in detail what women workers should be fighting for, but none how this would be paid for.

In the discussion on domestic violence and housing, Socialist Party member Maggie Fricker, Southampton Health, raised the need for funding a mass council house-building programme and a campaign for the return of resources cut from local government, so that women aren't forced to return to their abusers because they have nowhere else to go. She got an extra round of applause when she said: "If you behave like Tories we'll treat you like Tories".

Every criticism of Labour's priorities was applauded from the floor, and the anger at continuing cuts to services was very evident. Even general secretary Christina McAnea, a Keir Starmer supporter, felt forced to criticise Labour in her speech.

At the Socialist Party fringe meeting, Ellie Waple, a steward in Surrey County branch, said: "Unison needs to become a fighting, militant union if it is to have any chance of standing up to Labour, who will seemingly back bosses first and working people second".

Susie from Kirklees summed things up nicely by saying: "We need a new party to challenge the capitalists and be truly representative of the working class, rather than attack workers and not pander to the bosses".

RMT could lead national
fight against austerity

Socialist Party member Ted Woodley is seeking nomination to stand for the Midlands region seat on the transport union RMT's National Executive Committee (NEC).

This contest is for a vacancy that has arisen due to the previous NEC member standing down before the end of her full term. Ted intends to also stand for the full term in the scheduled election this summer.

This will be a crucial set of elections for the RMT, coming as Keir Starmer's Labour government has set a clear course of further austerity. With general secretary Mick Lynch retiring, the future direction of the union is at stake, and electing fighting NEC members who will face up to the reality of the Starmer government is essential.

Ted, a senior conductor, says:

I was inspired by the stand we took throughout the national rail dispute. We proved to the government and the rail bosses that if they want to take us on we will fight back. I believe that the RMT should play a central role in the trade union movement in building an industrial and political resistance to the bosses' agenda.

RMT must help lead a national fightback against austerity - regardless of which party is in government.

I stand for a fighting strategy to restore the real-terms pay we have lost since the Covid pandemic, and to defend all jobs, pay and conditions across all grades. Bring outsourced workers back in-house and defend the railway pension scheme.

I support RMT's political strategy - we must only support politicians who support our union's policies. No support for any politicians voting for cuts or privatisation in local or national government; we should be prepared to give support to independent anti-austerity, pro-trade union candidates.

I will ensure that RMT is a member-led union, with members engaged with and involved in all key decisions.

should also be nationalised. We must be prepared to defend our jobs, terms and conditions under 'Great British Railway' and fight for a fully funded, unified and public-owned railway as part of an integrated public transport system.

The levy was originally introduced by the previous NEC, which was dominated by the misnamed 'Left Unity' grouping, of which general secretary Fran Heathcote and national president Martin Cavanagh are a part. They lost their majority on the NEC in last year's union elections. Since July, the new NEC majority (which includes the BLN) has proposed that the levy should be immediately reduced for the lowest-paid PCS members, and reviewed to ensure it is effective. But that has been deliberately ignored by the general secretary and president.



PHOTO: PAUL MATTESSON

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Dishonest PCS 'Left Unity' sends message
of weakness to Starmer and Reeves
Join with us for a fighting PCS and pay campaign

DAVE SEMPLE
PCS VICE PRESIDENT, PERSONAL CAPACITY

Within hours of the conclusion of the PCS union's National Executive Committee (NEC) on 14 February, memes, a video from the general secretary and an all-members email had gone out proclaiming the 'good news', that the union's strike levy had been scrapped.

In reality, this is not good news at all. All PCS Broad Left Network (BLN) supporters at the NEC meeting voted against the termination of the levy, as did two independent socialists. We believe that the levy continues to be necessary if we are serious about winning a good deal for members on pay, conditions like hybrid working, and on reversing job cuts.

The levy was originally introduced by the previous NEC, which was dominated by the misnamed 'Left Unity' grouping, of which general secretary Fran Heathcote and national president Martin Cavanagh are a part. They lost their majority on the NEC in last year's union elections. Since July, the new NEC majority (which includes the BLN) has proposed that the levy should be immediately reduced for the lowest-paid PCS members, and reviewed to ensure it is effective. But that has been deliberately ignored by the general secretary and president.

Heathcote has no plan to fight

January and February's NEC meetings demonstrate Heathcote and Cavanagh have no plan to fight in 2025, and by ending the levy have telegraphed that to a hostile set of employers - be it Starmer and Reeves's Labour government and its Westminster departments, agencies, or devolved areas.

At the January NEC meeting, the general secretary had put forward zero recommendations following discussions on pay with the employer. BLN supporters put forward the need for a campaign.

As well as little movement on pay, job cuts are proceeding in Westminster departments, and a major dispute of outsourced staff against their behemoth employers continues to rage - despite Angela Rayner's promise to be the most in-sourcing government for a generation.

With no excuse to rule the campaign motion out (which is what the president usually does to everything put forward by the NEC majority), Cavanagh and his supporters backed it and promptly began acting like they had proposed it themselves.

But then only one instruction in the motion - for NEC Liaison Officers to consult every area - was acted on. The other steps agreed, such as the production of materials and

basic preparation to put the union on a war footing, have been ignored.

Nothing has been done to start readying PCS for a pivotal next few months, in which, among other things, the government will publish the Civil Service Pay Remit for 2025-26. Reeves has already indicated that pay rises will be 2.8%, about half of last year's inadequate offer.

NEC majority proposes next steps

There are eight BLN supporters, four independent socialists, and seven supporters of the Independent Left (IL) group, that make up the majority left coalition on the NEC (the Socialist Party is part of the BLN). We met to discuss feedback from the areas we liaise with and concluded that more work had to be done by the leadership to give our reps and members confidence that a struggle could win.

The basic elements necessarily include national all members' strike action, supplemented by paid strike action targeting areas which put enormous pressure on the ordinary functioning of the government. Such an approach is not new, but it requires millions of pounds to ensure that members who asked to go on strike can cover their bills.

On this basis, a motion - which can be read in full at bln.org.uk - was proposed by the NEC majority to the February NEC meeting. We also repeated our call to immediately reduce the levy for the lowest-paid and review it.

Cavanagh, as president, vetoed the motion.

Independent Left mistake on the levy

But then IL members demanded that a vote be taken to revisit the question of suspending the strike levy.

IL supporters are an integral part of the NEC majority left coalition which defeated Left Unity in the May 2024 NEC elections, and which is standing again in the forthcoming elections. But we do not agree with their decision to seek the end of the levy.

For us it's a question about what the union needs to do to win a victory for members? We do not have the same resources as we had at the end of 2022, which supported the targeted action in the strike wave.

There is also significant paid action taking place by our outsourced members, as well as localised and group strikes. The union's fighting fund is in overdraft, yet the general secretary and national president argue that this is somehow separate. A levy makes up the difference and more.

Unfortunately, IL's mistake gave Cavanagh and Heathcote sufficient votes to terminate the levy - without having to answer the question, what

way forward to a serious campaign in 2025?

Agreement on need for a fighting leadership

The BLN will continue to make the case for a coherent strategy that can win the support of thousands of PCS reps across all bargaining units, and behind which can be mobilised hundreds of thousands of civil servants, outsourced workers and workers in arm's length bodies.

While we may differ with IL on what some of those tactics might be and how they might be funded, we remain in basic agreement that any serious campaign requires the voting out of Cavanagh and Heathcote, their Left Unity supporters, and their blocking tactics.

It is for this reason that we are putting forward Marion Lloyd for president and a united slate of left candidates in the PCS elections to lead the union and build this campaign, to re-establish a fighting, democratic PCS.

Nominate Marion Lloyd
for national president and
see 'Nominate Marion
Lloyd for PCS President'
at socialistparty.org.uk for
the full slate of fighting
left candidates

Benton Park View
PCS strikers winning
wider support

ELAINE BRUNSKILL
NEWCASTLE SOCIALIST PARTY

It was good to see University and College Union, Unison and trades council members with their banners supporting the strike action of PCS members at HMRC Benton Park View, Newcastle. The action by the civil service union is in defence of three reps who were sacked for their trade union activity.

Joel Hamilton, one of the sacked reps, explained that the dismissals of the other reps, Rachel Farmer and Gordon Askew, were directly related to the strike action taken by PCS members as part of the national pay campaign across the civil service. Their dismissal added to the already poor relationship between PCS and HMRC at Benton Park View.

Joel went on to describe how his case, though separate, occurred during this period of deteriorating relations. Joel had raised concerns about the treatment of staff, including worsening terms and conditions, which was happening with a lack of consultation.

By the start of 2024 all three PCS reps were dismissed. Joel added that since then the PCS has "supported us in every possible way." However, he added, "We are still waiting almost three months into another period of industrial action for HMRC to negotiate with us".

Joel ended by explaining: "From a mental health point of view, I went from having a stable and structured routine to having nothing. So as a neurodiverse person I'm struggling to manage my mental health, which is very dangerous."

At the rally in front of the entrance to Benton Park View there were both messages of support and a recognition that trade unions were going to have to fight Starmer's Labour. Even Mary Glindon, a local Labour MP, mentioned how disappointing Labour is under Keir Starmer.

Ending his address at the rally, PCS vice president Dave Semple issued a clear message to HMRC: "We will win this fight!" And this message chimed with the mood of those taking industrial strike action.



PCS strikers at Benton Park View. Dave Semple, and two sacked reps Rachel Farmer and Joel Hamilton, behind the banner ELAINE BRUNSKILL

Unison members on strike at Kings College London in 2022 MARY FINCH



BRITAIN'S LITANY OF PRIVATISATION FAILURE: NATIONALISE!

Thames Water: profiteering writ large



Renationalisation is posed sooner rather than later in the case of Thames Water
PHOTO: PHILAFRENZ/CC

CALLUM JOYCE
SOUTHERN REGIONAL SOCIALIST PARTY ORGANISER

Mountains of debt running into billions of pounds; crumbling, leaky infrastructure causing scandal after scandal; byzantine, multilayered corporate bureaucracies that make your head spin to read about - the water industry has become a symbol of everything rotten in Britain today.

Barely a month goes by without another news story exposing these issues - another rise in water bills, another town or suburb without access to clean water, another water boss receiving thousands of pounds in bonuses. It is clear to all that privatisation of the industry, carried out in 1989 by Margaret Thatcher, has been a complete and abject failure. Even the Financial Times editorial on 17 February had the headline: "Time to put Thames Water out of its misery".

The 'free market' was supposed to deliver more investment leading to a better service. The water companies' £5 billion worth of debts were even written off ahead of privatisation to help incentivise potential investors.

Since then however, they have managed to rack up over £74 billion worth of debts between them. For what purpose? Certainly not for maintaining and expanding infrastructure!

Instead, the water companies have paid out an eye-watering £83 billion in dividends to shareholders while sewage has flowed into our lakes and rivers and water bills for the average household have risen by over 40% - with further rises set for this year.

Most of the companies are now owned by foreign investment funds and asset managers whose primary motivation is to make maximum possible profit, in the shortest possible

time. As public utilities, water companies make for attractive investments. The income from bills is seen as much more stable than in other sectors. This reliable stream of income is not seen as an obligation to provide a decent service, but rather as a lucrative asset to borrow against!

The private water companies have taken out billions of pounds in loans simply for handing money over to shareholders and paying bloated executive salaries. Why bother investing to maintain and upgrade infrastructure if you think people will always buy your water regardless? The system is completely broken. But on the basis of private ownership, how could it ever have been any different?

£19 billion debt

82% of people support renationalisation of the water companies - up from 59% in 2017, according to a 2024 YouGov poll. Renationalisation is posed sooner rather than later in the case of Thames Water, which is suffocating under a £19 billion debt pile. The company has now secured funding, without which it faced default on part of its debts next month.

Starmer's government is unable to simply let the company, which provides water to over 16 million people, financially collapse. The most likely outcome will be that it is forced to put Thames Water into a form of temporary renationalisation that would allow it to oversee the restructuring of the company while it continues to function.

The plan is not for this to be nationalisation as any sort of pro-working class measure, but a way to try and make Thames Water more attractive to investors before it is later sold back into private ownership

and the whole rotten cycle can begin again! Starmer's fear is that once the seal is broken, pressure will grow for further nationalisations and on a lasting basis.

We need nationalisation that is permanent - for all the water companies - so that utilities can be run as part of a plan for providing high-quality, properly funded public services. This should not come with a penny of compensation for the fat-cats who have already pocketed billions from the industry. However, any worker who has their pension or personal savings invested in the industry should have those secured as part of a broader plan to nationalise the pensions and finance industry as well.

But fixing our public services cannot be achieved simply by nationalising and then leaving the water companies to be run by unelected government-appointed suits. Scottish Water is proof - unlike the English and Welsh water companies, it has remained in public ownership all this time, but is still responsible for numerous sewage leaks due to a lack of investment in infrastructure.

Nationalised water companies would have to be run by democratically elected and accountable committees of workers and service users who can properly allocate resources based on what people need, not profit or cost-cutting pressures. The huge wealth freed up by removing private profit interests and abolishing all debts - from the water industry and from the other key sectors of the economy as well - would provide more than enough resources to repair and massively expand infrastructure, bringing down bills, providing a high-quality service, and protecting our environment.

Privatisation fails. That is the lesson from Britain's experience giving profit-making companies' ownership and control over our infrastructure and services.

The last New Labour government - that of Tony Blair - introduced Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) in which public bodies are tied into huge bills to big corporations to build and maintain buildings and infrastructure. After costing our public services billions of pounds, those deals are about to start reaching expiry. Crumbling buildings are to be dropped by PFI profiteers no longer obliged to offer the pretence of 'maintenance'.

Starmer's new New Labour government has learned nothing.

His health secretary Wes Streeting said of the NHS: "I'm actually very sympathetic to the argument that we should try and leverage in private finance". And the NHS Chief Executive: "I think we now must consider private capital investment in the NHS".

We need public investment to meet the need, paid for by taking wealth and power out of the hands of the super-rich. That's why the Socialist Party fights for nationalisation of our services and utilities under democratic workers' control and management, and for a new mass party of the working class to fight for workers' interests, not those of the profiteering bosses.



The privatisation of Port Talbot steelworks in 1999 has only led to job losses and, recently, the closure of its blast furnaces
PHOTO: LEWIS CLARKE/CC

GB Energy is not nationalisation

HEATHER RAWLING
SOCIALIST PARTY NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Over the last ten years, a shocking quarter of a million older people in the UK have died from the cold. During the same period, energy prices have risen by around 150%. Last year, Centrica released figures showing that British Gas profits jumped to £751 million in 2023, up from £72 million a year earlier, and that £144 million was paid to shareholders.

While we shiver this winter, some may hope that the Labour government's plan for a state-owned energy company will provide some comfort.

Not a bit of it! The government-imposed energy price cap keeps rising together with the bosses' profits.

Labour is giving £8.3 billion of public money to Great British Energy, in the dim hope of stimulating private investment into green energy.

GB Energy's board will be chaired by Jurgen Maier, a former boss of Siemens. It will operate just like a capitalist enterprise with the working class being left out of decision making.

The Labour Party conference symbolically voted in favour of renationalising energy in 2023. But that doesn't make it party policy. And this is not nationalisation, not by a million miles!

In the aftermath of World War Two, many industries were nationalised including: water, gas, electricity, railways, buses, steel, telecoms, British Petroleum, British Airways, Rolls-Royce and Rover, before successive Tory and Labour governments sold them off cheap to private investors.

Sound familiar?

They were nationalised as the existing private owners had failed to invest. Sound familiar? Capitalism had a need to rebuild infrastructure devastated by war. It also acted under pressure of the working class.

Unfortunately, the previous owners were paid massive amounts of compensation and interest. Unbelievably, the previous managers were left in charge! In some nationalised

Telecoms: technology hamstrung by profit and competition

CLIVE WALDER
RETIRED BT WORKER AND COMMUNICATION WORKERS UNION ACTIVIST

Telecommunications are more important to the vast majority of humanity now than at any time in history. If the telecoms system collapsed it would severely impact lives. It is vital that it is both accessible and affordable.

The big telecoms companies don't quite see it the same way, however. To them, profit is the sole driver. Because of that, there are still some remote parts of the country where broadband is patchy or non-existent.

The whole development of telecommunications has been closely bound to the profitability of providing new services. This decided if and to what extent the network was developed. Telephone services were initially provided by small local companies or local councils and worked under the umbrella of the National Telephone Company. It proved impossible to develop an integrated telephone network under private ownership, so responsibility was passed to the Post Office in 1912.

Public ownership and billions of pounds of investment made the industry enormously profitable, and it became an early target for privatisation under Margaret Thatcher's Tory government in 1984. While the old state operator had, and its descendant BT still has, an obligation to provide services anywhere in the country for a uniform cost, the new private companies could pick and choose where they provide services, decisions based purely on profits.

Growing pressure

This led to growing pressure on BT to scale back on socially useful but loss-making services. In order to maintain profitability and secure investment for the future, BT began to attack the relatively high pay and good working conditions of its staff, including axing jobs. The other effect of privatisation and competition was the building of duplicate networks in the most profitable areas, leading to a huge and unnecessary overcapacity of cables.

The introduction of cable TV saw an explosion in the number of telephone companies, many just local franchises

covering one or two towns. One by one they were bought up by bigger companies and now most customers just have a choice of BT or Virgin Media. This proves that telecoms, like other utilities, is a natural monopoly. Takeovers and mergers are a natural feature of capitalism and can never be eradicated from its working. Broadband is another example of how capitalism is unable to develop the full potential of new technology. While broadband only became available to the mass of the population at the turn of this century, the technology itself was available much earlier.

In the early 1980s, the Post Office Engineering Union (part of today's Communication Workers Union) saw the potential of using broadband technology to carry out repetitive tasks and things like remote health screening and working from home, using the time saved to share work out and shorten the working week. This became union policy. But broadband wasn't developed then because the capitalists could not see a profitable application. This only changed with the introduction of home computing and the internet.

Telecoms companies make huge profits exploiting our need and desire to communicate, and have managed to connect us as never before. Capitalism is a system driven by the blind pursuit of profit and will always put profits above our needs. That's why, to provide the maximum benefit modern telecommunications can provide, the infrastructure and operating companies need to be publicly owned and democratically planned on a global basis.



Marching in support of sacked P&O workers and demanding nationalisation
PHOTO: ISAI MARIERA

Waltham Forest Labour cuts 'graver than austerity'

KEVIN PARSLAW
UNITE THE UNION WALTHAM FOREST COUNCIL
BRANCH SECRETARY

To say that the scenario painted was grim is an understatement. Waltham Forest council chiefs met representatives of local government trade unions. "It feels like 2010", said one senior council officer, "graver than austerity", referring to the severe cuts brought by the then Tory-Lib Dem coalition. Waltham Forest Labour plans to cut £23 million this year, and another £11 million by 2027-28, to avoid section 114 'bankruptcy' notices.

More pain

So Labour will inflict more pain on the borough's employees and residents, rather than build a campaign involving other councils, unions, and residents to fight for cash for local authorities?

These cuts include the equivalent of 120 full-time employee reductions - 4% of posts - plus the loss of some agency staff, a devastating blow to an

already-stretched workforce. Labour is trying to sweeten the pill by claiming the senior leadership of the council is 'top-heavy', and will be cut.

But most posts lost will be further down the scale. The council already agreed over 90 voluntary redundancies last year.

Anti-cuts campaigners have already had one small victory, with the further delay of the decision to close the Markhouse Centre for adults with learning disabilities.

And the local trades union council, with the support of Waltham Forest Socialist Party, has called a protest at the council's budget-setting meeting - launching a campaign for an alternative, no-cuts needs budget.

- Come to the town hall steps to tell Labour what you think...
 - Present 'People's Budget' night of full council meeting - Thursday 27 February, 6pm
 - Lobby council cabinet trying to close Markhouse Centre - Tuesday 11 March, 1pm

Wave of campaigners reject Brighton Labour cuts

DAVID MAPLES
BRIGHTON SOCIALIST PARTY

Faced with cuts of £16 million, there has been lobby after lobby of Brighton Labour council.

Parents of special needs children faced with cuts, campaigning for improved out of school and respite provision. Adult social care users campaigning for adequate funding. Housing campaigners trying to stop homeless people being uprooted away from friends and family. Unison union council workers fighting for adequate staffing.

Money for war

The Labour councillors have no answers. Keir Starmer may find extra funding for war, but austerity continues on the home front.

Brighton Trades Union Council and Brighton Unison are playing a vital role in bringing campaigners together. A further lobby is planned for

the budget-setting meeting on 27 February. But what next?

The Green Party councillors have supported the lobbies, and called for the return of the £110 million stolen from the council each year since 2010. In office, however, they have implemented cuts. Each time they have led the council, they have become deeply unpopular.

Greens

With 843 Green councillors, and the leadership of 12 councils, they could lead a national challenge to austerity, if they advocated no-cuts budgets. Unfortunately, this appears to be a closed book to them. Trade unionists should challenge them on this.

There is determination to fight against the cuts that Labour is proposing. This needs a consistent call for a budget based on what people need, and councillors with an unwavering anti-cuts stance.

One of the many protests opposing Brighton Labour cuts. This time organised by Unison union. DAVID MAPLES



Successful campaign to stop repeated attempts by Hackney Labour council to close children's centres HACKNEY SOCIALIST PARTY

Hackney socialists and independents challenge Labour cuts

HACKNEY SOCIALIST PARTY MEMBERS

At our Hackney Socialist Party public meeting on fighting council cuts and the housing crisis, we had Claudia Turbet-Delof from the Independent Socialist Group of councillors speaking.

Gaza

She is one of three Hackney councillors who resigned from the Labour Party to form their own independent group last year. Earlier, they were suspended by the Labour group for voting in favour of hearing a motion calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

Claudia gave insight into the

council. Some council cabinet meetings that make crucial decisions, only last 15 to 20 minutes. At one cabinet meeting, the papers stretched to 2,700 pages, leaving little possibility for scrutiny.

She gave detail of £3 million public health cuts by 2027. £170,000 cut from community wellbeing, £300,000 from sexual health services, mental health support discontinued, and addictive substance services slashed.

Claudia grew up in a working-class household in Bolivia, with street protest, trade union struggles, and poverty the norm. She agreed in general with our approach to fighting cuts.

Following 14 years of Tory rule, over £140 million has been slashed from Hackney council budget, with hundreds of jobs cut, alongside a significant reduction in real take-home pay.

Food and energy bills have gone up. Rents have become unaffordable for many in the private-rented sector, with little or no council-house building. Many born and brought up in Hackney have been forced out of the borough.

Hackney Labour council has continued to pass on cuts to frontline services. Young Hackney, which supports youth clubs and hubs, is being cut by at least 25%, with lots of jobs on the line.

Children centres have faced closure twice in the last three years, and have only been saved by parents mounting a strong campaign, supported by Hackney Unison union, and staff in the centres.

Last year, four schools closed. Four more face closure this year, with significant disruption to children's education.

The future does not look rosy. 85% of county councils say they are worse off after Rachel Reeves's budget.

London boroughs face a £500 million shortfall. Hackney faces budget cuts of £67 million over the next three years.

17,000 Londoners are in temporary accommodation. Many end up in hostels, hotels, sub-standard

The Hackney Independent Socialist Group of councillors is drawing up an alternative budget, jointly with Green councillors, to challenge Labour's budget cuts. They are calling on underused community halls to be opened up for free, or with a nominal charge, to be used as community hubs in each ward area.

New people

The meeting was very successful in attracting several members of the public to attend for the first time. First, Hackney Socialist Party member Brian Debus, a lifelong trade unionist, introduced the discussion.

housing with poor repairs, damp, and mould.

What's the alternative? The Socialist Party has advocated for some time that councils should produce legal, balanced, no-cuts budgets. This could protect services by using reserves and prudential borrowing, as councils have cash-rich assets.

This can only succeed in the short term. Councils need to campaign alongside trade unions, service users, community groups, community campaigners, voluntary sector, and other political parties, and combine with other councils in the same boat for the necessary funds to protect services.



Cardiff students rally against uni cuts

ARIS PROVOST
CARDIFF SOCIALIST STUDENTS

Cardiff Students Against Cuts hosted a rally outside of the Main Building at the Cathays Campus on 12 February to demand that Cardiff uni vice-chancellor Wendy Larnar and the University Executive Board stop the 400 proposed job cuts.

Dodging every question

Preceding the rally was a town hall meeting between students and the vice-chancellor, which was predictably a farce. Larnar over run in her initial speech, dodging every single question that was asked, and left 15 minutes early.

While Larnar showed the cowardice of the higher-ups in the Cardiff uni management, the rally showed the resilience and solidarity that the students, staff, and trade unions have. While it was a cold and slightly wet

affair, over 100 people turned up, with several speakers including students and staff from courses being cut completely. It also heard from the Vice President of the Cardiff University and College Union (UCU) branch, as well as representatives from Unite and the Trades Union Council, who are both Socialist Party members. A strong theme running throughout the rally was how vital the cut courses were for Cardiff, especially music in the Wales, the 'Land of Song'.

Staff-student solidarity

Socialist Party member Dave Reid rounded off the speeches. He urged students to fight back against the cuts through solidarity between the students and the workers, backed by the trade council.

Cardiff UCU is balloting for industrial action. It is vital that if and when they go on strike, that us students stand on the picket line with staff. It is

only through class solidarity that we can mount a fightback and stop these cuts.

Only the beginning

This rally is only the beginning, we are having weekly meetings hosted by Cardiff Socialist Students to decide our next steps campaigning.

We demand that Cardiff University stops the 400 job cuts, for the vice-chancellor and executive board to be sacked and replaced with workers who understand the day-to-day workings of the University. We call on the Labour governments in Cardiff and Westminster to treat education like a public good and to fully fund higher education.

Join the student fightback
JOIN socialist students
socialiststudents.org.uk/join

CHRIS CORNEY
WALTHAM FOREST SOCIALIST PARTY

Numbers were boosted for the demonstration in solidarity with the people of Gaza in central London on 15 February.

In part, the atmosphere of defiance and determination was a reaction to the obstruction and arrests of peaceful demonstrators by the police at the last demo on 18 January. But, on this occasion, policing was low key, with no attempt by the police to change the route of the march, nor to block or arrest demonstrators.

Police

The police may have been stung by widespread criticism of their tactics on 18 January. Though it would be naive to imagine that there will be no further attempt to disrupt future protests.

Judging from placards and banners, another factor motivating marchers to turn out in greater numbers was the recent pronouncement by Donald Trump that Gazans should be forcibly removed from their homeland to make way for a "Riviera". Disgust at this blatant call for ethnic cleansing,



ISAIAH MARJERLA

and the muted response of the Labour prime minister Keir Starmer, has drawn more people onto the street, even with the precarious ceasefire.

Socialist Party members participated in the march. Our placards said: "Stand up to Trump"; and "Starmer's Labour means war and austerity".

Hundreds bought the Socialist paper. Our front page said: "Stand up to Starmer and Trump", with an article inside, saying: "Trump threatens new Nakba" (see socialistparty.org.uk).

And we collected contact details from marchers wanting to hear more about the Socialist Party.

Socialist Students invite MP to back free education campaign

ROBBIE DAVIDSON
MANCHESTER SOCIALIST STUDENTS

The Trade Union and Labour student societies at the University of Manchester hosted a Q&A with Labour MP Richard Burgon. Burgon supported Jeremy Corbyn when he was Labour leader.

Burgon voted against Keir Starmer's government, opposing the two-child benefit cap, which leaves hundreds of thousands of people in poverty. He was suspended as a Labour MP for this, but let back in the day before the meeting.

Blocked

We submitted a question, asking Burgon to take the demand for free education and an end to tuition fees into Parliament. But the question was blocked by the groups at the head of the Q&A.

Instead, the MP was asked simply if he believed in free education, to which he comfortably answered "yes", whilst avoiding how he would act on his belief with a fighting plan.

Our members used the more open segment of the event to ask Burgon, given his suspension and the weakness of Labour's base in the working class, if it was now time to look towards an alternative party, built



Left-wing Labour MP Richard Burgon RIVENLAND/CC

on the trade unions, with socialist policies. His answer was simple, a re-sounding "no".

The dozens of students in the room were asked to keep faith in the 'broad church' of the Labour Party. Is Burgon walking on egg shells with Keir Starmer to protect his job in Parliament?

Jeremy Corbyn

We were not alone in our criticisms of Labour. One young person left Burgon fumbling for words, asking: "Should we vote for right-wing Labour candidates over pro-working-class independents, like Jeremy Corbyn?"

The Socialist Party continues to fight for political representation for trade unions and working-class people - a fight Burgon is welcome to join us in.

Bradford opposes council tax rise



IAN DALTON

EUAN THOMAS
WEST YORKSHIRE SOCIALIST PARTY

A crowd of 200 people rallied against proposed council tax increases of 10%. We set up our Socialist Party campaign stall, giving out our placards opposing the Labour council's proposed rise, demanding the super-rich pay.

Socialist Party member Tom Gibson took to the steps to address the crowd. "It's time working-class people stood up against the exploitation of our city... We can build a mass movement to fight this increase, and the cuts."

We asked demonstrators to sign our petition to force a debate during the coming budget meeting. Signatures came in thick and fast, over 100. We struggled to close our stall as people asked to sign.

Those we talked to shared sentiment of anger and betrayal, especially as it has recently been reported that some councillors have missed their tax payments. "It's one rule for us and another for them", one said.

Even as some felt hopeless, the turnout was a rousing reminder of public support for the message of our campaign.

South West socialists discuss building the fightback in the workplace and trade unions

SHEILA CAFFEY
BRISTOL SOCIALIST PARTY AND NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION (NEU) EXECUTIVE MEMBER, PERSONAL CAPACITY

As socialists, we know the importance of building a broad-based movement of the working class to challenge the ills in capitalist society. With that in mind, the South West region of the Socialist Party called one of our day schools, aimed at developing members to take leading roles in our party, focused on building in the workplaces and trade unions.

It was a successful day, with 25 members attending with a range of roles and experience in different trade unions, including CWU, NEU, PCS, UCU, Unison, Usdaw and Unite. Some had joined unions in the last couple of months, some aren't yet union members, and some had been active for several decades. We added up to over 250 years of experience fighting in unions for a socialist method and voice!

I introduced our first session on perspectives for the trade union and workers' movement, discussing how demands we raise in unions are linked to pushing forward to achieve fighting, democratic unions. Several members spoke about the concerning moves to a partnership agreement between the Labour government, employers and the education unions, effectively trying to muzzle dissent and prevent action. We discussed our demands in those unions, as well as examples of



where there's already a problem with partnership deals in retail - including allowances for employers to make cuts and redundancies every four years! We also considered if Labour would be likely to introduce partnership to other sectors such as health and transport.

Clint, who's been actively speaking to colleagues about the need to join a union after joining Unite at the end of last year, said: "It was brilliant learning about the history of how unions came about, and the involvement of the Socialist Party to cut across the bureaucracy to fight for the demands of the working class," illustrating the link between our party role in trying to guide the movement forward with also doing the day-to-day work in the workplace.

Our second session was 'Being a Marxist in the workplace', led by Duncan Moore, an executive member of the University and College Union (UCU). It focused on sharing ideas and building confidence to intervene in workplace struggles. We discussed in small groups, which involved all comrades taking part. Whether we're day one in a job or on the national executive of a union, we all have a role in speaking to workers and bringing them towards the party.

Annabel, who's recently been able to join a trade union, summed up the day: "I really enjoyed the day school, and I feel like I've learned lots from more experienced members. I now feel ready and prepared to go to my first union branch meeting to start getting more involved and bringing socialist ideas!" What more could we ask from members keen to fight for unions to take a leading role in changing society into a socialist one, which would benefit the whole of the working class!

Trade unionists lobby Welsh government to support 560,000 pensioners facing winter fuel payment cut

DAVE WARREN
SECRETARY PCS WALES ASSOCIATE AND RETIRED MEMBERS SECTION (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

On 4 February, the day the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) met to discuss the 2025 budget proposals, Unite the Union and the National Pensioners' Convention, supported by the PCS Wales Executive Committee, held a noisy lobby outside.

Demonstrators called on the Welsh Government to use some of its £26 billion budget to support the 560,000 Welsh pensioners who have lost their winter fuel payment this year.

To its credit, Unite has been particularly active in opposing the UK government's cut to the winter fuel payment. While it is necessary to campaign for that decision to be overturned, it is also correct to put demands on the Welsh government. Unite proposes a series of options to mitigate the damage to Welsh pensioners, namely targeting help at housing benefit recipients, council tax reduction recipients, or disabled pensioners. It also suggests setting up a central fund to which pensioners suffering hardship could apply for help. While any extension of the criteria for receipt of some kind of payment would be welcome, these means-tested schemes are no substitute for an adequate payment direct to all pensioners.

Speaking on behalf of PCS Wales Associate and Retired Members section, I told the 100-strong rally that



the payment of universal benefits was one of the cornerstones of the welfare state. Neither the state pension itself, nor access to the NHS are means tested and the UK Labour government had undermined that fundamental principle.

Hannah Blythyn, Labour MS (Member of the Senedd), emphasised her trade union credentials

and pledged support for pensioners in general terms, but at no point did she oppose the cut to the winter fuel payment. That is not good enough. The least that a speaker at that rally should have done was to oppose the cut the rally was called to oppose. The Labour Social Justice Secretary in the Welsh government, Jane Hutt, has defended the cut to the winter

fuel payment in the Senedd and refused to criticise the Westminster government.

While the campaign to force the Westminster government to restore the payment must continue, the Wales TUC should campaign for the Welsh government to fund its own universal winter fuel payment for pensioners in Wales.

Kirkby campaigners demand council homes and services

Knowsley council was forced to conduct an emergency planning meeting over a controversial application to build 807 private homes in the centre of Kirkby. The common consensus in the town is against the project.

Kirkby has seen housing projects constantly since the 1950s. It has also seen social housing neglected, schools academised and services cut. There is an abundance of private homes, including those falsely categorised as "affordable". Average rents have more than doubled in just ten years.

Kirkby campaigners have been fighting for better infrastructure: more schools, dentists, doctors and youth services.

The planning committee session was a special session because there had been so many objections to the proposal. Our campaign addressed the meeting, asking planners to go back to the drawing board and bring us council houses with schools and essential services. The Labour councillors were having none of it.

They claim the proposal will bring 'prosperity' to the town, they arrogantly dismissed concerns over school places, and cast aside our grave concerns over the toxic chemicals in the ground of the proposed site, which is a former landfill site.

Through campaigning we collected hundreds of objections to the proposals. But it is now clear that Knowsley's Labour council intends to press ahead. Campaigners will meet to discuss further plans.

NEILL DUNNE
LIVERPOOL & DISTRICT NORTH SOCIALIST PARTY

The fight to save St Mary's Leisure Centre in Southampton continues

NICK CHAFFEY
SOUTHAMPTON SOCIALIST PARTY

For over 20 years, local campaigners and members of the Socialist Party have fought to keep St Mary's Leisure Centre (SMLC) open. Once again it is under threat. First the Lib Dems, then the Tories, and now Labour.

The latest proposals are to hand the centre over to a third party. Labour's warm words of reassurance are: "We appreciate the importance of the venue to communities and aim to complement existing activities with a varied programme of activities and usage."

Given the local council's historic desire to shut down SMLC, wouldn't a third party be a way forward? However, what guarantees does a third party offer to deliver services, let alone survive in the current climate of economic stagnation?

There is a vital need to ensure access to low-cost and free sport, leisure and health activities for all. But under capitalism, all these things come at a cost. Fine if you have the money to join a private club, but what if you don't?

Inner-city Southampton is one of the most deprived areas in the south of England. Life expectancy is now ten years less than the wealthiest parts of the city, the result of 15 years

of austerity, cuts to pay, pensions, benefits and public services.

And under a Labour government it's getting worse! Our communities are having to choose whether to eat, heat or pay council tax to avoid a visit from the bailiff. How are families going to afford to access SMLC run by a third party free to raise charges and further exclude the needs of the local community?

In its prime, by no means perfect, SMLC hosted free Saturday sports clubs for young people, midnight football for local youth, GP referrals to help health recovery, and a myriad of local sports clubs. Much more was needed but how can we be certain that a third party will succeed?

Since the Labour council was elected in 2012 it has carried out cuts and proposes to do a further £46 million this year. Other successful services, such as the council-run youth services, were handed over to third-party providers and rapidly closed, with the land sold off to profit-hungry housing developers.

Where will the funding come from to run SMLC? What guarantees are there that the money will be found? Who will decide how much staff are paid in wages, or their pension, sick pay and holiday terms? The Tories privatised Southampton Leisure services in 2010, resulting in cuts to staff, pay, and terms and conditions.

When facilities needed urgent repair, who got the bill? The council!

We demand a real future for SMLC, fully funded by the council, staffed by well-paid council workers and run with the direct democratic involvement of the local community. This should be part of a mass campaign to rebuild city services by restoring the £500 million council funding cut by the government since 2010.

We are fed up of excuses from failed Labour councillors and MPs. If you're not prepared to fight step aside for those who will.

Nadia Ditta, Socialist Party member, stood in Bevois ward where the centre is, for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition in 2024, getting 848 votes, 32%, showing the appetite for a fightback against austerity in working-class communities. The strikes of 2022-23 showed the trade unions have the power to win. A combined campaign of working-class communities and council unions can force concessions from the council and government.

The money is there. Southampton council has reserves and borrowing powers that could be used to set a no-cuts, people's budget in February. We are determined to secure the future of SMLC and appeal to everyone to back our campaign for a council-run, fully funded sports and leisure centre.



Marching in 2004 to save the centre
PHOTO: SOUTHAMPTON SOCIALIST PARTY

Labour's Bell, out for the count!

ALEC THRAVES
SWANSEA UNITE RETIRED MEMBERS BRANCH (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

Swansea Unite retired members branch, probably one of the largest and most active trade union branches in Wales, invited our new Swansea West Labour MP and recently promoted Pensions Minister, Torsten Bell, to address our meeting on the performance of the first seven months of the Keir Starmer government.

Around 30 Unite members, ex-shop stewards, conveners and activists, were keen to question the MP, particularly on the government's decision to end winter fuel payments.

It was a lively meeting, to say the least!

Before being parachuted into the relatively safe Labour Swansea West seat by the Starmerite election machine, Bell was the Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation, an "influential economic research charity working to raise living standards of households on low to middle incomes".

Our Unite retired members reiterated that they were naturally delighted that the Tories got hammered in the general election. But, after seven months of Labour in office, many

members questioned why the Starmer government wasn't confronting the rich and powerful, and instead immediately attacking the poor and weak in society, particularly the young and elderly.

Bell was asked why he had voted against the Tory two-child benefit limit being abolished, considering those families lost around £3,200 a year for any third or subsequent child born after April 2017?

It was pointed out and quoted to him from his pre-election book that before being elected he had loudly proclaimed that this "appalling policy... must be abolished".

Even more contentious for our retired members was the Labour government's decision to remove the pensioners' winter fuel payments!

Our members have held protests, campaign stalls, lobbied Parliament (where there was a 'no show', and no apology, from the Swansea West MP), and just last week our members held a big protest outside the Labour-led Senedd in Cardiff (see above).

Unite is now taking the Labour government to the High Court for a Judicial Review to overturn this disgraceful decision.

We have spent millions of pounds in affiliation fees over the years and

at the general election we spent a further half a million pounds sponsoring 86 Labour candidates. Members think it's a crazy state of affairs that we are now spending more of our money, taking 'our party' to the High Court, especially after our motion to restore the winter fuel payment was passed at Labour Party conference, but then ignored by Starmer.

Bell's argument, like numerous other Labour MPs, was that he had been obligated by parliamentary tradition and procedure to vote for the government's first 'Kings Speech'. It didn't wash with members!

As one member commented afterwards: "These loyalist, Starmerite Labour MP's remind me of one of Marx's quote (not Karl but Groucho) who said: "Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others!"

Incredibly, Bell urged our branch members not to attack the Labour government in public but to keep their criticisms and opposition internal!

Not much chance of that in Swansea retired members branch, considering 14 members bought a copy of the Socialist during the meeting, looking for a fighting socialist alternative.



Torsten "those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others" Bell PHOTO: HOUSE OF COMMONS



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 trade union struggle for the immediate implementation of the TUC demand of a £15-an-hour minimum wage for all as a step towards a real living wage, 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.

- 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.
- Agribusiness to be taken into democratic public ownership. For a food processing and retail industry under workers' control to ensure that standards

- 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.
- For the right to asylum – with democratic community control and oversight of emergency funding resources. No to racist immigration laws.
- Expand democracy. For the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords. For all MPs to be subject to the right of recall by their constituents at any time, and to only receive a worker's wage. For proportional representation and the right to vote at 16.
- For the right of nations to self-determination. For an independent socialist Scotland and for a socialist Wales, both part of a voluntary socialist confederation of Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland.
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- 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.

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Do you agree? Join the fightback!

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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.
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SOCIALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

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- For the right of nations to self-determination. For an independent socialist Scotland and for a socialist Wales, both part of a voluntary socialist confederation of Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland.
- Oppose the dictatorship of the billionaire owners of the media. For the nationalisation of newspaper printing facilities, radio, TV and social media platforms. Access to these facilities should be under democratic control, with political parties' coverage being allocated in proportion to the popular vote at elections.
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West Ham concessions campaign Stop rip-off tickets and reclaim our game!



Hammers United, including Ciarán (centre) protesting outside the London Stadium before a game against Wolves in December. PHOTO: JAMES IWEINS

CIARÁN O'DONOGHUE
NEWHAM AND EAST LONDON SOCIALIST PARTY AND WEST HAM SUPPORTER

The West Ham United board has shown little appetite for ending its attack on reduced-price tickets for the young, pensioners, and disabled people.

The campaign to reinstate concessions, led by fan group Hammers United, is still going strong. Members of the Socialist Party have stood alongside Hammers United at many of their protests. 22,000 people at the time of writing have signed a petition calling for an end to inflation-busting ticket price rises and the restoration of concession tickets. The campaign has received support from fan groups of rival clubs who have stood alongside outraged West Ham fans at every home game since the start of the season.

The club prices its tickets by bands based on their quality. Bands 5 and 6 are the lowest, and offer appalling views where it would be a good idea for a fan to bring binoculars so they can actually see the pitch! Against the big clubs these bands are sometimes discounted while the club charges £70 minimum for tickets with an adequate view. This is quite frankly appalling considering the spiralling cost of living facing working-class fans.

Aside from the ticket price issues, there is the issue of the cost of food and drink at the ground. Fans will find themselves having to pay ridiculous amounts for poor-quality food. On the footballing side of things, the ownership has been criticised by fans constantly for poor decision making as well as misuse of funds,

general incompetence, and unfitnes to run a football club.

Many fans lament the move from Upton Park, which many believe has robbed the club of its soul and ripped it out of the working-class community by which it was built. The new stadium in Stratford is not built for football and consequently the atmosphere has suffered, as has the general matchday experience which has become sanitised. Many lifelong season ticket holders have decided to stop going to games. These are but some of the many grievances held by fans.

This all paints a picture of a club in turmoil - and it most certainly is. But this story is playing out at clubs all across the country at every level. Clubs like Bury have gone out of existence. Oldham Athletic have sunk from the heights of the Premier League all the way into the National League due to poor ownership. Manchester United are now in the hands of Jim Ratcliffe and Ineos, who have begun to make staff redundant en masse.

Football should be democratically run by the fans - but to achieve this it needs to be taken out of the hands of big business. Control and ownership of clubs should be in the hands of fans, players, staff, and the wider community they serve through democratically elected committees. The current greed and corruption of football under capitalism cannot be allowed to stand - we must fight for socialism and to reclaim the game!

• 'Reclaim the Game' - a socialist programme for football by John Reid, new edition coming soon - available from leftbooks.co.uk

GERMAN ELECTIONS: WHAT WAY FORWARD FOR THE WORKING CLASS?

BRENT KENNEDY
CARLISLE SOCIALIST PARTY

Germany goes to the polls on 23 February for elections to the Bundestag (parliament) after the so-called 'traffic light coalition' (comprised of social democrats, Greens and liberals) collapsed in November.

Germany is one of the richest countries in the world. But there is deep dissatisfaction due to economic decline and crumbling physical and social infrastructures, illustrated daily by the chaos on a once reliable railway system. After years of sacrifice, wage restraint, benefit cuts, privatisation and the spread of low-paid, precarious jobs, the working class can see no light at the end of the tunnel and there are widespread fears about the future.

This has alienated many people from the 'moderate' establishment parties who have governed this malaise for years in every variant of coalitions and only disappointed most voters. Broad masses now want something radically different. But how could the SPD (social democrats) and Greens offer a better life for workers in the recently collapsed coalition with the liberal FDP - the "small party of big business"? All three will now be punished by voters.

However, even worse attacks on living standards, jobs and services will come from a CDU-led coalition - maybe with the Greens, maybe with the SPD and FDP, depending on the results. Another winner will be the racist populist AfD (Alternative for Germany), which is now second in the polls. The election could see seven parties getting over the minimum 5% of votes to enter the Bundestag, or only four.

The background to all this is the serious crisis facing German industry. From the 1990s, German capital moved into low-waged Eastern Europe and China. Replacing factories at home with new ones abroad enabled them to extract concessions from trade union leaders on wages and conditions of employment. After the 2008 world financial crash, Germany increased its own trade at the expense of its Southern European EU and Eurozone "partners". It was able to use its high productivity to become the world's top exporter at one stage.

But now the direction of travel internationally is away from globalisation, and towards protectionism and trade wars. The lack of domestic consumer demand due to a shrunken share of national income for workers means that this export dependency has left the former 'powerhouse of Europe' more exposed to the vagaries of and sharpening competition within the world market.



CWI Germany
protesting against the AfD. PHOTO: SOL BERLIN

Workers are faced with factory closures, lay-offs, longer hours and wage cuts, dramatically seen at Volkswagen. The illusion of 'social partnership' between unions and employers, which contributed to industrial peace and political stability for decades, now lies in tatters, replaced by the brutal reality of a class society based on exploitation and growing inequality to maintain shareholder value. At this stage, the union leaders can't come to terms with this reality and have capitulated to bosses' demands, for example accepting 35,000 job losses at Volkswagen.

In this new point in history, with two years of recession and a bleak future creating political instability and radicalisation, there exists no mass workers' party to offer a way forward.

The trade union bureaucracy - representing mainly skilled workers in secure, protected jobs - has maintained its loyalty to the SPD. This hasn't stopped the growth of the precarious over the last 30 years. Sections of low-paid and unemployed workers, as well as small business owners and others, now look to the AfD

as an electoral alternative.

The SPD and Greens broke with the rhetoric of the 'social state' 20 years ago, with drastic attacks on benefits and with peace and no military intervention abroad. Now they have made an even more dramatic break with their past 'principles' by increasing the share of GDP spent on armaments, even changing the constitution, putting a huge financial burden of 100 billion euros onto the working class. This openly imperialist and militarist course reflects a worsening of the capitalist world economy and relations. They have also brutally suppressed domestic opposition to their stance on the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

In the last decades, workers in the east of Germany have given Die Linke (the Left) the first chance, electing it to office in several states. But instead of using these positions as a platform to mobilise mass movements against

government cuts or high rents, for example, giving it an opportunity to win support for genuine socialist ideas, these 'practical' politicians have loyally administered the capitalist system, along with the SPD, through more cuts and privatisation. As a result, Die Linke failed to become a mass workers' party and eclipse the SPD and Greens.

A section of the party's right wing around Sara Wagenknecht jumped the drifting ship and formed the populist BSW, which panders to anti-migrant and anti-benefits prejudices. It has even joined the conservative CDU in one state government, as have the Greens in three others. However, in the polarised situation, Die Linke's membership has suddenly jumped by over a third this year to a record high while it has also risen in the opinion polls.

To divert attention from their planned full-frontal attack on workers' rights, living standards and conditions, the CDU has cynically seized on brutal and tragic killings to make racism against migrants the main election issue. In 2016, then CDU leader Angela Merkel didn't bring in 1 million refugees as an act of kindness, rather to boost the supply of labour to business, to try to keep wages down and worsen conditions of employment. Now the bosses are exploiting migrants politically, blaming them for all the failures of their declining system.

The CDU has symbolically removed the so-called 'firewall' it used to try to politically isolate the far-right AfD, by passing a motion against migration together with the AfD and BSW. But in reality, all the capitalist parties have adapted to anti-migrant populism for years, which just legitimises the racists and enables them to go further.

The SPD and Greens are outraged by this taboo break because it removes the long-nurtured pretence of a cross-class liberal 'morality'. The AfD should be combated with a political alternative that offers a genuine solution to the mounting economic and social problems.

The SPD and Greens can't, because big business can't 'afford' those concessions and maintain its wealth. Any attempt to combat the AfD by bureaucratic means, relying on the state to ban it, just ducks the issues, reveals the SPD's political bankruptcy and will boomerang.

A new CDU-led government offensive and the emboldened far right must be challenged from below by the unions and social movements. With its new support, Die Linke should actively turn to workers involved in the coming industrial struggles to defend jobs, wages and conditions, and it should help build the Network for Militant Trade Unions, as the Socialist Party's sister party in Germany, Sol, already does.

If unions, migrants' organisations and other social and protest movements come together to fight the inevitable government attacks in the workplaces and in the streets, then they could form the basis for a new mass party. Die Linke could be the focus for this, but only by basing itself on the struggles of workers and youth, and adopting a fighting socialist programme.

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the Socialist

Issue 1310

20-26 February 2025

formerly **Militant**

FIGHT ALL COUNCIL CUTS

Birmingham bin workers strike

'The Labour council weren't expecting this'



CLIVE WALDER
BIRMINGHAM SOCIALIST PARTY

Pressure from strike action, and the determination of bin workers to defend their pay grading, has forced Birmingham Labour council to the negotiating table. Their strike action has been stepped up from one day a week to three.

There was a large and noisy lobby of bin workers on 12 February. The presence of angry striking workers led the council to relocate the talks to a nearby hotel!

Bin workers don't buy the lies peddled by the council to justify this

savage attack on their living standards, which could see some workers lose £8,000 a year. One striker said: "You do the maths. Seven commissioners, taking a grand a day each, say they can't keep us on our existing pay!" It would only take 50 days of commissioners' pay to settle this dispute.

The council originally thought that they could divide council workers against each other, or get rid of the dispute with a small one-off payment. As one striker said: "The council weren't expecting this."

Failure to beat the strikers into submission has led to the council recruiting agency street cleaners

and then transferring them to refuse collection. Strikers say this may be against employment law.

Unite lead officer Onay Kasab gave a fighting speech, offering the full support of the union. He said that there is plenty of money hoarded by the rich and big business that could properly fund council workers' pay.

Yet Birmingham Labour council is preparing to agree a further £148 million in cuts to services, alongside a 7.49% increase in council tax.

The council was roundly condemned for refusing to ask Starmer's Labour government for enough money. They hid behind the Tories

for the last 14 years and now won't ask their own government for more money.

The workers were particularly outraged when the news broke that councillors have voted for a 5.7% increase in their own allowances.

Members have voted to reject a new offer from the council and will now ballot over escalating the strike action.

A striker said: "This country ain't for the working class anymore." Although there are no elections in Birmingham this year, Socialist Party members are discussing with others about calling a meeting of all those who want to fight for a no-cuts budget, in preparation

for the 2026 elections.

Birmingham council is not alone: Labour councils up and down the country are forcing through massive cuts rather than demanding the funds from Starmer. Imagine the irresistible force that could be built if councils pledged to make no more cuts and stood together, mobilising a big campaign alongside them.

Birmingham bin workers show the way forward: we need workers' action and we need a fight for no-cuts needs budgets. That includes standing anti-austerity and socialist candidates in council elections. Build a mass campaign - and fight for our own working-class political voice!

WHAT WE STAND FOR: THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S MAIN DEMANDS >>> see column on page 14

