

WORKERS

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DECEMBER 2007 £1

BRITISH JOBS FOR BRITISH WORKERS?



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WORKERS

“ Who dares talk about migration?

IN THIS issue of WORKERS we return, and not for the first time, to the question of the free movement of labour. Why? Because it represents a deep-seated challenge to the British working class. And let us be clear what we mean by the British working class: all those, of whatever origin, living permanently in Britain and living by selling their labour power.

An unholy alliance of neoliberal economists, do-gooders, much of the so-called “Left”, of Tories, Labour and Liberals, of the right-wing WALL STREET JOURNAL and the so-called liberal GUARDIAN – in short, the Establishment – is constantly telling us that migrant labour is good for Britain. So is the World Bank and the European Union. If all these people agree, can they all be wrong? Well, yes. If they all agree, we say, they are more than likely to be wrong.

Anyone who dares to question the prevailing orthodoxy is labelled in the media and even at union meetings as a crackpot or worse, a racist, a bigot. Some in the union movement even join up with the WALL STREET JOURNAL and call for the removal of all restrictions on entry. Free movement around the world, they say.

But as our articles show, there is only one beneficiary from this “freedom”: capitalism. It has discovered the magic formula for keeping wages down, even during an economic upturn.

There’s always someone, somewhere in the world, who will work for less – and with cheap airfares, well, it’s cheaper to fly to Stansted from Wroclaw than a day return from London to Southend.

The political commentators all say migration is good for Britain. Is it good for workers in east London who will be shut out of jobs building the Olympics? Is it good for the hundreds of thousands of London workers who cannot even dream of buying their own houses because demand from migrant workers has fuelled a boom in house prices and encouraged a host of buy-to-let landlords? What about buy to live, not to let?

Is it good for Britain to strip weaker economies of their skilled workers? Does it make sense for midwives in Sierra Leone, where one in eight women die in childbirth, to be lured to Britain simply because there’s not enough money to fund midwifery courses here – or, apparently, to pay proper salaries to midwives? Isn’t that simply imperialism – stripping the developing world of its resources?

If you are one of the millions of workers in Britain worried by these questions and uneasy at the effects of the unprecedented mass migration that Labour has ushered in, then this issue of WORKERS is for you. Read it, argue about it, and pass it on to your workmates and friends.



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Building on flood plains

Coming soon

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STUC meeting opposes treaty

THE CAMPAIGN to oppose the imposition of what amounts to a state constitution chaining Britain to the EU continues apace, as evidenced by a fringe meeting on 13 November at this year's Scottish TUC Women's Conference in Glasgow.

It brought home the impact of the EU's pro-capitalist nature on workers' lives. The meeting, on "Why there should be a referendum on the EU Reform Treaty" was subtitled "The implications for working lives, health services and pensions".

Rozanne Foyer, a national organiser of the Unite T&G union, with her direct knowledge of women working in the public sector, spoke of the threat to collective contracts. Over the past two decades, she explained, the extensive growth in numbers working through agencies has led to unregulated exploitation – in an area which sees some of the worst cases.

At the meeting, a leading member of Dunfermline Trades Council gave a personal account of how her life had been adversely affected by her employer using EU support and legislation to cheat her out of a substantial part of her pension. Her opposition to the EU was backed up by the Chair of the Scottish Pensioners' Forum. She asked why trades unionists should tolerate retired workers having some of the worst living standards in Europe while our government is praised by the EU for its loyal adherence to EU pensions guidelines. That adherence results in pension funds being plundered.

The dangers of separatism and disintegration could be seen in the Scottish National Party administration's unwillingness to commit to calling for a referendum. The meeting saw great dangers in the increased exploitation resulting from the unregulated movement of labour.

The Chair of the Musicians' Union (Scotland), Eddie McGuire, who was also chairing the meeting, urged delegates to spread the knowledge of these dangers and to take their demands for a referendum and opposition to the treaty to the wider union movement. This would then be building on votes won this year at both the STUC and the TUC conferences.

• At the end of October Giscard D'Estaing, the drafter of the Constitution, sent an open letter to European newspapers, published in, among others, the French paper LE MONDE. He wrote: "The institutional proposals of the constitutional treaty ... are found complete in the Lisbon Treaty, only in a different order and inserted in former treaties." He suggested that the new more complicated layout was only to avoid putting the treaty to a referendum: "Above all, it is to avoid having a referendum thanks to the fact that the articles are spread out and the constitutional vocabulary has been removed."

If you have news from your industry, trade or profession we want to hear from you. Call us or fax on 020 8801 9543 or e-mail to rebuilding@workers.org.uk

ID CARDS**Fingerprinting children**

ALL CHILDREN aged 6 years and upwards are to be fingerprinted for EU passports and nationally issued ID cards. Hidden away in European Commission and European Parliament resolutions and regulations [Article 62(2)(a) of the Treaty establishing the European Community; Regulation of the European Parliament and Council amending Council Regulation (EC no. 2252/2004!], the decision to press ahead has been given the green light. Serious consideration as to the fingerprinting of children aged younger than 6 years has been undertaken but shelved after "technical considerations".

In another decision, all passengers travelling in and out of the EU are to be recorded – to be called passenger name records (PNR). These will be profiled and stored for 13 years. The European Parliament has been consulted but as with national parliaments not given a voice. The EU's own Data Protection Agency is opposing both these measures – not being convinced of the necessity. The decision of the EU to spy on all who enter Euroland mirrors the secret decision they arrived at with the US government to provide personal details on all travellers to the USA via the EU.

EURONOTES

The latest from Brussels

The rush to sign

DESPITE BEING warned by the Labour-dominated European Scrutiny Committee of MPs that its "red lines" were not met and would "leak like a sieve", the government did not push for any further changes to the text before signing up.

The revived Constitution – now the Treaty of Lisbon – will be formally signed at a ceremony in the Portuguese capital on 13 December. Brown will then try to rush it through Parliament as quickly as possible. He hopes that by giving little time for discussion, he will be able to quell growing demands from Labour MPs for a referendum.

Caucus cracks

THE EUROPEAN Parliament's neo-fascists, and their friends, are united by a hatred of foreigners. And divided, too.

This mutual hatred has led to the demise of the parliament's first official ultra-right caucus. It needed 20 members to get official status, with the accompanying perks and funding, and with the entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the EU they managed it this year.

Then Mussolini's grand-daughter, an Italian neo-fascist MEP, went and called all Romanians criminals. So out went the Romanians, down went the number below 20... and goodbye to the caucus.

Go on, move to China

TRADE COMMISSIONER Peter Mandelson is up to his unpleasant tricks again. He wants to change EU law so that European companies with factories based outside Europe are excluded from trade tariffs.

Italy is among those opposing the move. It says the plan would legitimise "dumping of imports from companies with European capital which have relocated". It would also encourage even more capital to move abroad.

Cornish poll

THE EU has ruined the fishing industry around the coasts of Cornwall. So it is no surprise that people in the Illogan area of Redruth felt compelled to organise their own "parish poll" asking whether a national referendum should be held – the district council had refused to organise or fund one. Ninety-six per cent were in favour of a national referendum when they voted in early November.



Photo: Workers

Health campaigners and trade unionists took to the streets on 3 November in a march and rally called by Unison to celebrate and defend the NHS.

End Cuba blockade, says UN

ON 24 OCTOBER, US President Bush called on the Cuban Army and people to overthrow the Cuban government, promising to tighten the 45-year-old blockade and set up a "freedom fund" with allies to rebuild capitalism in Cuba after the government was overthrown. The Latin American diplomats in his audience stayed silent; some hand-picked Cuban Americans cheered. He even introduced people he said would be the next leaders of Cuba. Bush is the tenth US President to call for the socialist government of Cuba to be overthrown.

Six days later, the United Nations General Assembly voted to condemn the US blockade of Cuba, calling on the US Government to end it immediately. The vote, the 16th time the General Assembly had voted against the blockade, was by the biggest majority ever – 184 to 4 – with Israel, Palau and the Marshall Islands (US colonies in all but name) alone in supporting the US position. The US could not even muster the Iraqi government to support its stand.

This really is the voice of the international community that we are constantly being told about. It begs the question though, who exactly are the allies of the US who will help with help with Bush's "freedom fund".

CIVIL LIBERTIES

Tap, tap...tap, tap...

IN EARLY OCTOBER an extension to the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 was introduced. All details of phone records from landlines and mobiles have now to be retained by telecommunications companies for a minimum of 12 months and can be handed over without opposition to the police and to central and local government officials plus a further 650 public bodies and quangos. This changes the original requirement that companies should voluntarily retain and forward the information – they must comply.

Farcically, the Home Office denies that the contents of texts or messages will be read, and maintains that it is only where the call was made from and to whom that will be recorded. Recording where the call was made from effectively means that mobile phones will be used as tracker devices for individuals.

And of course the change is justified by the ongoing war on terror – even though the legislation was introduced before the September 2001 bombings in New York and the official declaration of the "War on Terrorism".

Of course, the legislation does meet the requirements of an EU Directive on retention of phone data. So that's OK!

Local govt ballot fiasco

AS INDICATED in the October edition of *WORKERS*, the pay negotiations in local government were heading for the rocks, with every other local government trade union having gone through the motions of consultation before biting off the government's pay offer of 2.5 per cent. Meanwhile, Unison pressed ahead with a ballot for industrial action. This decision came out of a combination of cowardice, where they were not willing to address the political realities already acknowledged by the membership, and preparedness to allow the adventurism of the ultra-left.

The ballot saw a 24.4 per cent turn-out. Where were the other 75 per cent of the membership? Out of 144,719 returned ballot papers a tiny majority – 74,631 to 70,088 – voted for industrial action. Then the leadership did at last assert itself and the call for strike action was turned down. But the charade continues with a face-saving slogan for next year's pay negotiations.

The reality is that the strategy for public sector pay negotiations has been an abject failure and every year during the last four years Those who think there is going to be a massive explosion over pay from the public sector are wearing blindfolds. Where are the troops?

Perhaps a different perspective should be taken over public sector pay. The government is intent on driving down gross domestic product costs from the public sector so as to meet EU targets. Remember the famous convergence criteria which would justify going into the single currency? Every backdoor method possible to shift government debt from the public accounts to the private sector – the Private Finance Initiative and myriad other "public-private" or "public-partnership" wheezes have been invented. Public sector pay is being driven down; work is being outsourced to the private, voluntary, partnership sector. The old days of big pay sector pay disputes are gone.

The challenge to all public sector unions is how to retain membership, bargaining, recognition, density and influence in what is a dwindling public sector but growing alternative private, voluntary, public partnership sector providing services to the public. Pro-union employers in local government are hinting that the limits set by the Treasury under the Comprehensive Spending Review for the next three years will see funding for growth something like 1 per cent in year one, 0.7 per cent in year two and zero if not a minus in year three. Their view is that local government is in waters comparable with the worst years of the 1980s under Thatcher. If storms are coming, then survival and a battering down of the hatches may be the order of the day.

UNEMPLOYMENT

On the rise



FIGURES RELEASED by the government indicate a rise in unemployment of some 7,000 people in October, bringing the official number of unemployed in Britain to 1.7 million people.

The employment statistics have been dubious throughout 2007. On the one hand the government claims that in January 2007 the figure was 1.6 million unemployed and that there has been a creeping increase. On the other hand they claim the greatest number employed in Britain – over 28 million workers.

This is coupled with the huge number of economic migrants – over 1 million – during the last 12 months.

Unemployment traditionally dips before Christmas as seasonal employment increases; a rise at this time bucks the trend and is therefore particularly worrying.

In addition to the official analysis there still stands research from the University of Sheffield published during the summer which indicates that a further 1 million hidden (by incapacity and other benefits) unemployed are still masked by government statistics.

Most of these are to be found in the traditional heavy industrial areas – steel, coal and textiles in the North and other shattered industrial areas.

If the figures of carers, the retired but looking for work, benefits claimants etc are taken together, a figure nearer 5 million people affected what the government calls "worklessness" starts to emerge – not the 1.7 "official" figure. 28 million people may be in work but a further 1 in 6 would like to be.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

DECEMBER/JANUARY

Through to 20 January.

Eurobo£locks: Britain's relationship with Europe. The Cartoon Museum, 35 Little Russell St, London WC1.

Tues–Sat 10.30 to 5.30, Sun 12 to 5.30

If you're in London over the Christmas/New Year period, take time to pop into the museum for an hour or so to this hilarious exhibition of political cartoons about the European Union. See www.cartoonmuseum.org for details.

LISBON TREATY

Mass Portuguese march

DURING THE EU summit last month Intersindical, the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, organised the biggest demonstration in Lisbon in the last 20 years. Up to 200,000 people gathered to oppose the 'neo-liberal' EU reform treaty, which more or less equals the rejected EU constitution.

The funny – or alarming – thing is the fact that these 200,000 people managed to demonstrate almost unnoticed in Britain, without being mentioned by the media. Similarly, the media completely ignored the 27 October rally in London against the Treaty.

HEALTH

US nurses strike

NEARLY 700 nurses have been on strike at nine Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) hospitals in Kentucky and West Virginia since 1 October.

The nurses are concerned that ARH's staffing decisions and rampant mandatory overtime are preventing them from giving patients the best possible care.

In pay negotiations, ARH is proposing modest pay increases but then demanding cuts in holiday pay and increases in health care premiums, effectively wiping out the pay increases.

The US equivalent of the TUC, the AFL–CIO, said that it and online donors will be contributing \$20,000 to help the striking nurses. This donation comes just three days after the working men and women of the AFL–CIO delivered a truckload of food worth some \$10,000 for the nurses in Hazard, Kentucky.

Ironically, the ARH hospitals were started by the legendary miners' union leader John L. Lewis to help sick miners.

Plain lunacy: building that flooded a county



Photo: Workers

AS YOU entered the Gloucestershire town of Tewkesbury during July to September by the old A38 route you would have seen a banner draped on the front of an old house saying “Don’t let the town drown Mr Brown”.

The floods of this year – both flash and the typical type – have again raised the questions regarding the logic of building on areas within designated flood plain.

Recently Tewkesbury Borough Council approved the continuance of building within the M5 corridor at Junction 9, which many locals argue is having serious affects on the nature of flood water management, whether the new buildings are placed in the designated flood plain areas or not. This decision was taken following a referral from a previous meeting at which local residents marched on Tewkesbury Borough Council’s offices protesting about building on flood plain.

At a council meeting in mid-October one councillor proposed a ban on any further development in the Tewkesbury area until after a full inquiry into July’s floods. But feeling the pressure of the government’s house building programme and the possible penalties imposed by building firms, councillors referred this to the executive committee.

The local plan has called for the provision in the Cheltenham and Gloucester urban areas of a total of 17,906 dwellings between 2001 and 2016 – almost half the 37,931 dwellings to be provided in Gloucestershire as a whole.

Many say that building up the low-lying land by creating man-made embankments to protect new houses within the flood plain or outside it causes the flood water to displace to other areas which would not normally see high levels of surface water.

One local councillor recently challenged the council by showing the latest Environment Survey of suspected flood plain and described the situation of the July floods where houses previously never regarded as liable to flooding (even flash flooding) were deluged with three feet of water, and linked this to the building of new houses not far away.

The council also called on the government to substantially increase spending on flood defences, in line with the requirements of the Association of British Insurers. Without this some properties in the town would be uninsurable and therefore unsaleable – destabilising the future of the town.

Over the next four pages, **WORKERS** does it fit in with the free movement

British jobs for British

WHEN GORDON BROWN, looking for a good sound bite in the run-up to his “election” as prime minister, came up with “British jobs for British workers” it caused a stir. It’s still causing a stir, and in some strange places, too.

It’s a reflection of how odd things are in this country that such a statement should be controversial. Back in the days before Britain joined the European Union (more exactly its forerunner, the European Economic Community), this was indeed the policy of all governments: employers wishing to hire people without UK citizenship or residency had to demonstrate that they could not find anyone suitable without going abroad for their labour.

It’s controversial now, though, and for two distinct reasons. First, the idea that there are things called “British jobs” that should go to British workers is illegal. Under the various treaties of the European Union, there is supposed to be free movement of labour within the EU: so “British jobs for European workers” is about as far as Brown is legally able to go.

The only variation on this allowed by the European Union is the pace at which workers from the new EU members in Central and Eastern Europe – the so-called “accession states” – can be part of this migration of labour. Under Labour, Britain has been the first to welcome workers from Poland, Lithuania, and so on.

It was the illegality of what Brown appeared to be saying that the Conservative Party picked up immediately. Instead of criticising the policy of free movement of labour, it sniped at Brown over the illegality, in typical “oppositionist” mode.

Read his lips

Brown, of course, may be dictatorial and reactionary, but he is not stupid. Look at what he actually said: “It is time to train British workers for the British jobs that will be available over the coming few years and to make sure that people who are inactive and unemployed are able to get the new jobs on offer in our country.”

Make of that what you will, and the spin doctors did. Hence “British jobs for British workers”. But look closely and you can see Brown was not saying that at all. He was saying, in so many words, “British workers lack skills and training [after 10 years of Labour!] and without it they’ll stay out of work.” The last thing he was saying was that any jobs would actually be reserved for British workers.

His statement drew criticism from another quarter. There are those in the labour movement, even employed by trade unions, who have become nervous or downright hostile to the word “British”, especially when it is used twice in a sentence. They think that as a word it is inherently racist or at best “nationalistic” (which to them is more or less the same thing).

These people look at the slogan “British jobs for British workers” and call it “offensive” and “ridiculous”. Or they say the government should avoid “the mantra ‘British jobs for British workers’ because it could play into the hands of racists and bigots” (Paul Kenny, General Secretary, GMB, at the Labour Party Conference, 25 September).

But what, exactly, is “offensive” or “ridiculous” about the slogan? And would it play into the hands of racists and bigots? Or, on the contrary, will refusing to face facts play into those hands?

In the heady days of the bid for the 2012 Olympics, the people of London were promised jobs aplenty building the stadium. But the cynics were right:

Building the Olympics: where local people

IN NOVEMBER this year households in east and southeast London received through the letterbox the latest issue of "Your Park", promising latest news from the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA). Under the heading "Job opportunities for local people" we find...not job opportunities, but training being offered.

That's the Brown message as applied to the Olympics: not jobs, just the so-called opportunity to be trained for them. Read further down in the leaflet and you can get an idea of the scale of the ambition here: the Learning and Skills Council will invest £300,000 in support for a facility to deliver training in construction skills over the next two years for... "over 190 students"! That's around half a per cent of the expected 10,000 construction workers who will be building the site.

Open door for migrant labour

The London Olympic Games of 2012 exemplify the consequences of an open-door policy to migrant labour. Part of the original (and vastly underpriced) bid was the idea that it would bring "regeneration" to a run-down area of London, with lots of work for local workers.

The London Civic Forum mildly suggested in 2004 that there should be a requirement in construction contracts for



The Olympic site: clearing the ground...for the cheapest possible labour.

Photo: Workers

the Olympics for 30 per cent of the workforce to be local. Of course, nothing of the kind has happened.

One of the many promises made originally by the bid team and the London Development Agency was to look at

BADGE OFFER – Nationalise water. Reclaim our most vital resource!

BRITISH WATER supplies are in the hands of foreign owned monopoly companies who are enjoying a cash bonanza while our infrastructure crumbles. If the ridiculously high profits made by these companies in the last few years had been channelled into developing a national water grid and other infrastructure projects we would no longer be facing a water shortage.

As it stands, if there is low rainfall in the South East in any winter, then by the following summer much of South East England will be using standpipes.

Severn Water, for example, has seen an 18 per cent rise in profits as complaints against the company rose by 55 per cent and it was investigated for providing false data to OFWAT. And since it acquired Thames Water in 2000, RWE (its German parent company) has extracted over £1 billion in dividends to shareholders!

FIGHT BACK with a Nationalise Water! badge, available from Bellman Books, 78 Seymour Avenue, London N17 8EB, price 50p each, or £4 for 10. Please make cheques payable to "WORKERS".



of east London were told that there would be no jobs if the promises were empty...

come last

setting up a construction academy. The agency then announced an investment of £9.5 million in local employment training, with £3.5 million of this for construction. But as an article last year in *NEW START* magazine explained, "the construction academy will now be a web-based virtual academy, with the construction training money expected to go into existing colleges". Effectively, nothing.

"One of the promises we had was that energy and resources would be dedicated to training east Londoners up for these jobs," said Neil Jameson of the work empowerment charity the Citizen Organising Foundation in July last year. "In our opinion, nothing has happened."

Instead, employers – and the government – have looked abroad.

Fast track from Poland

In October 2006, the Construction Industry Training Board decided to set up an office in Poland to "fast-track" migrant workers into Britain. The idea: to run a pilot scheme, then extend it to draw in builders to work on big projects such as the Olympics and the London Gateway.

Is there a skills shortage, or is there another aim? Listen to Bob Blackman, construction sector national secretary for the TGWU section of trade union Unite and an employee rep on the Board: "This has been driven by government. They are the building industry's largest client. If they don't have migrant workers they will face a far higher bill."

Advertise abroad

FAR FROM trying to get British workers into employment, or keep them in jobs, the government is encouraging the opposite.

Through the Department of Work and Pensions, it advises employers on how to advertise vacancies in Jobcentres across Europe. "There is no charge for this service," the Department's website helpfully explains.

Listen, too, to business analyst Kevin Davey, from Hackney Enterprise Network, speaking in May this year: "Lots of people fear there will be a serious shortage of skilled construction workers in London from this year onwards, that wages in the industry will rocket, and that small local firms may start to lose their workers to bigger companies."

Rocketing wages? That's not something the government wants to see. But Davey adds: "Fortunately this isn't happening, or at least not yet. The influx of workers from eastern Europe, particularly Poland, has filled the gap. Polish workers have become a mainstay of the building trade over the last two years, ever since Poland and seven other east European countries joined the European Union in 2004."

It's often said that migrant labour is simply filling jobs that British workers don't want to take up. That's certainly not what's happening in construction, says Bob Blackman from Unite, quoted in the *MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS* on 13 November. He said that British construction firms offered just 7,000 apprentice placements last year – despite applications from 50,000 people. That, he said, was a consequence of industry getting used to "buying skills off the peg".

Olympics "on the cheap"

And in July this year, Alan Ritchie, general secretary of the construction union UCATT, said, "There is a growing fear that the ODA and the major Olympic contractors are trying to build the Olympics on the cheap, by employing large numbers of migrant workers on self-employed contracts [and] paying them far less than they would have to pay British employees...Companies using bogus self-employment are highly unlikely to train apprentices."

UCATT is campaigning against the decision by the ODA to allow contractors to recruit self-employed workers, which it says will lead to widespread tax avoidance and suck in bogus self-employed migrant labour to the detriment of opportunities for local people.



Supply and demand

IN OCTOBER this year, *Workers* published an article examining the effect of the large increase in migrant workers on the economy, particularly in relation to wages. The overall conclusion was straightforward: the increase in the supply of labour is leading to a decrease in its price – in wages. This is true particularly for unskilled work. The detail can be read at www.workers.org.uk/features/feat_1007/migrate.html.

Nothing has changed since October – except, of course, that the government has admitted that it has hopelessly underestimated the number of migrants.

It's a subject many in the trade union movement, and particularly in the TUC, want to avoid. Instead, they repeat the government mantra that the free movement of labour is good for Britain.

They need to ask themselves why they back a policy enshrined into EU law by Margaret Thatcher and supported by every employer and neoliberal apologist in Britain – and abroad – and championed by the *WALL STREET JOURNAL*.

So here's a quotation to think about, from Professor David G. Blanchflower, Dartmouth College, US, and a member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, which sets interest rates:

"Rising labour market slack, which has occurred in the UK since mid 2005 has likely reduced worker's bargaining power as has a rising fear of unemployment. The presence of highly productive workers from the A10 [the central and eastern European countries recently admitted to the European Union] who are prepared to work for relatively low wages along with associated increases in actual unemployment are what has helped to keep wages down."

Here's another thought: why was Britain the only large EU country to let citizens of the new member states work without restriction when the 10 new countries were added in 2004?

A London ambulance worker reports on a union visit to Cuba, observing the consequences of the American blockade of the island...

Havana and London: solidarity from ambulances

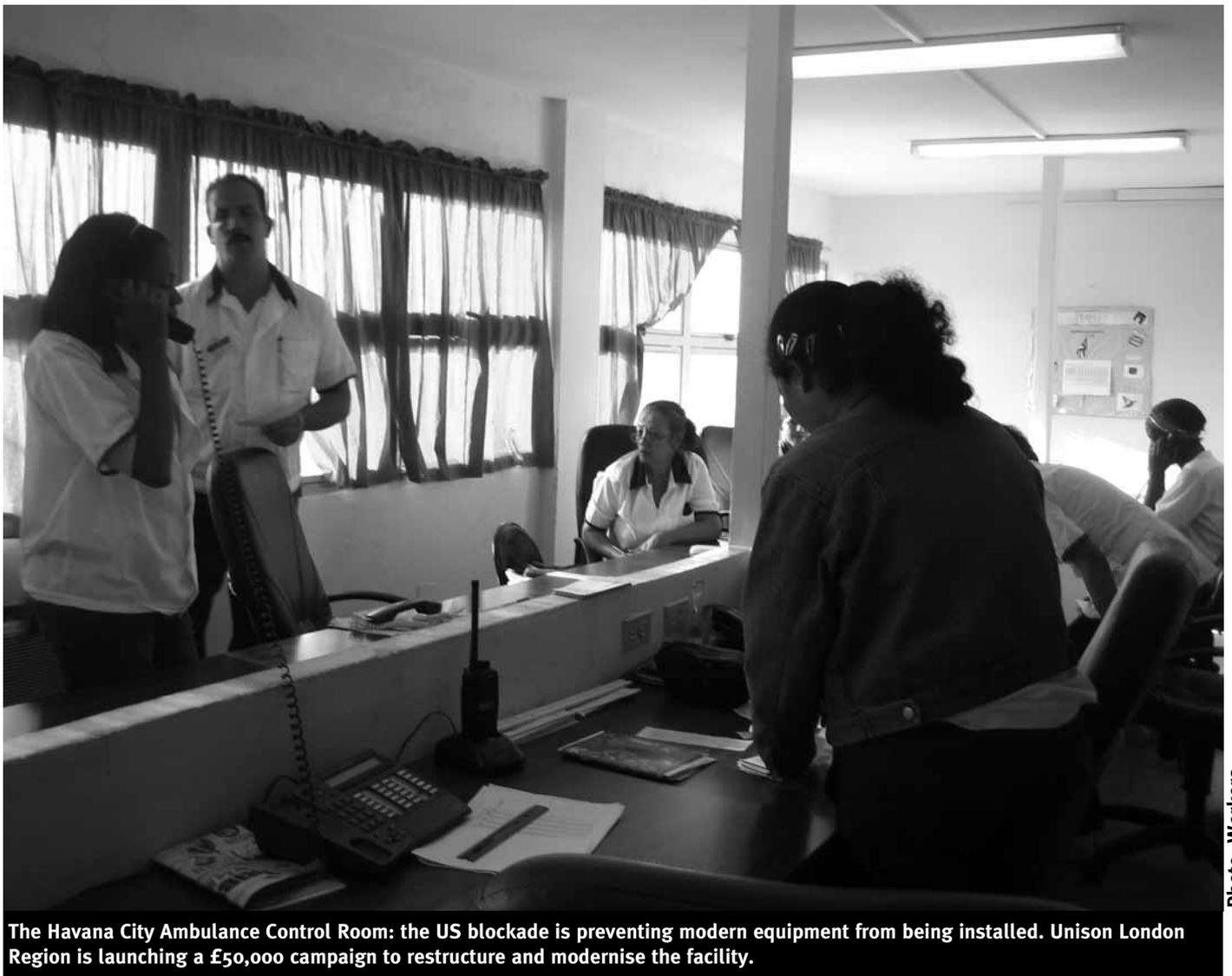


Photo: Workers

The Havana City Ambulance Control Room: the US blockade is preventing modern equipment from being installed. Unison London Region is launching a £50,000 campaign to restructure and modernise the facility.

UNISON has a long and proud history of solidarity with other trade unions around the world, particularly when it comes to health. Health should be a universal right for all people, but in some cases that right is denied, either by economic forces, or, as is mainly the case, political forces. Internal political and economic forces are usually seen as the culprit but in the case of Cuba, both these forces are applied vindictively and cynically by a close external superpower.

The history of Cuba and the Cuban

people is not for this article but it would be remiss of me not to applaud the magnificent achievements of the Cuban Health Workers Union (SNTS) in providing healthcare throughout the island in spite of the brutal fifty-year blockade by the United States. A blockade which denies trade, medicines, materials and basic human day-to-day necessities that we in Britain take for granted. A blockade, by the way, condemned by the overwhelming majority of countries within the United Nations, year after year.

London Ambulance Unison headed a campaign in 1999 when we were asked by Salud International if we could supply one ambulance to be included within a shipment of buses, fire engines and other containers of aid from British trade unions. In the end, with the help of generous union and private individual donations, we managed to send over 50!

It was a historic day when a ship called the LURIC docked in Havana and spilled its cargo of much-needed, blockade-breaking, solidarity onto the

...serving the daily struggle of health workers there to cope with

...ance workers to ambulance workers

quayside. A delegation from the branch went to Cuba and our strong ties with ambulance workers in general and the Havana City Ambulance Service in particular, began.

As British ambulance workers struggle with high demand, response times, mergers, reconfigurations, registration, low wage rises, Agenda for Change, unsocial hours, rest breaks etc (which is right because we live and work here and they are our particular problems to resolve), the daily struggle of our Cuban counterparts puts everything into perspective: a shortage of vehicles, spare parts, equipment, medicine, fuel, paper, phones, computers. The list goes on.

These are not shortages because of an incompetent management or government but because the things that they need and are willing to pay and trade for, are denied them by a huge, rich, powerful bully that wants to starve and destroy them, their way of life and their country.

I sometimes wonder how we would survive through a 50-year blockade of our shores and I hope we never have to find out. The population of the United States is about 250 million; the population of Cuba is about 12 million, just bigger than London!

Friends

That said, Cuba does have lots of friends in the world. Canada for one is a country which consistently breaks the blockade to trade and enter into partnerships with the Cuban government. Canada has also supplied ambulances, materials and spare parts to the health service.

On my last visit I also saw Mercedes ambulances on the streets after the government purchased them out of a financial loan from China. Things are slowly getting better as the country recovers from losing their most important trading partner – the Soviet Union – over a decade ago.

My last trip to Cuba was in December 2006. I visited a number of ambulance stations and for the first time, the Havana City Ambulance Control Room. I also

‘I sometimes wonder how we would survive through a 50-year blockade of our shores and I hope we never have to find out.’

spoke to trade union leaders and government ministers about Unison London Region’s strategy for further and ongoing solidarity work with our sister unions.

I went to the ambulance station in Old Havana, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The station has quadruple size bunks for workers to sleep between their 24 hours on/48 hours off shifts. I was told that one of their main problems was getting ambulances through the narrow streets in the centre and with no alternative, slimmer forms of transport, this has led to tragic, avoidable deaths.

I also visited an ambulance station outside of Havana in the Pinar Del Rio province. It was different from the one in Old Havana – bigger, more grounds, and in the country. The staff seemed more relaxed. They do 24 hours on and 72 hours off. The ambulance workers there rear their own chickens and grow their own bananas in the grounds of the station! There was also a huge herb garden growing alongside the mess room wall.

My next visit was to the Havana City Ambulance Control Room. This was my first visit and I was really shocked and upset at what I saw. It was as if I had walked back in time. I had been spoilt by the London Ambulance control room. Millions of pounds’ worth of high tech, three hundred or so highly trained staff, more computer screens than you can wave a stick at, bright lights, buzzing activity and controllers taking calls from the public and passing them on to the crews.

The Havana City Control Room was silent! It was based in two small rooms –no computers, no bright lights, no buzzing activity, no high tech. The main room was supposed to be the call taking room. Two big desks in the centre of the floor and about twelve telephones were all that was in it with pencils and paper to write down any calls that came in. Twelve telephones, pencil and paper to deal with a city with the population of around two-and-a-half million people!

Worse was to come. The room for dispatching had one desk, one old radio that looked like a trucker’s type, and nothing else. Even the most basic control room in the most basic voluntary or private ambulance service in the UK could not function like this. This is not the fault of the workers in the control room. It is not the fault of the Havana City Ambulance Service and it is not the fault of the Cuban government.

Health first

Cuba, in spite of the blockade, has always put the health of the people at the top of the agenda and a lot of the medical outcomes (mortality rates etc) are on a par with, or better than, a lot of rich western countries. Without trade it cannot invest and make an excellent service better. Doctors, health workers and ambulance workers have to function with one hand tied behind their backs. They need help.

That is why the Unison London Region is launching a campaign to modernise and restructure the Havana City Ambulance Control. The target is £50,000. This will help purchase computers, databases, modern phones with multiple lines, recording machines, radios (both for the control room and ambulances), call stacking equipment, tracking devices and much, much more modern control equipment that we take for granted. We are hoping also to buy a bike for the Old Havana Ambulance Station.

Above all, the campaign will save lives, and saving lives is what ambulance workers around the world are about. Solidarity!

Ninety years ago, the Russian working class shook the world with a revolution that would never be the same again...

The October Revolution – humanity’s greatest



Revolutionary militia on the streets of Petrograd, Russia, 1917.

THE CAPITALIST STATE of affairs has, since its beginnings, been projected as the natural way, the only way. God-given and reinforced by the church, to break away from it was to invite social disaster and chaos. This prevailing attitude of mind was smugly conveyed by the famous 19th-century hymn, ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL in its now rarely-sung later verse:

“The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.”

The first serious jolt to the complacency of the ruling classes came in 1871 with the uprising of the Paris Commune. At the beginning of 1871, after Emperor Napoleon III of France’s unnecessary war with Prussia had

resulted in invasion, the Parisian crowds proclaimed a republic. But the people of Paris were busy planning social reforms rather than getting to grips with the main threat – the Versailles government of Thiers. The commune was violently overthrown.

To the ruling class, the Paris Commune was a fleeting alarm. Quite soon, they forgot, thought it an aberration and went back to their old ways. World War One commenced with the conviction of the ruling class that their respective working classes would go down in mutual slaughter for the greater benefit of capital, for the heady growth of its armament companies and for the reconfiguration of its maps of empire.

Why was the Russian October Revolution so different? Above all

because it smashed the complacent arrogance of rulers everywhere and brought a new set of factors to the equation of governance. From that date, and for many decades on, the exploiters looked anxiously, nervously, over their shoulders.

The events that took place six months earlier, in the February Revolution, were significant. Petrograd, the capital of Russia at the time and the centre of huge military garrisons too, was taken by workers and peasants in uniform who refused to continue in the Tsar’s war. Consequently the Tsar fell, abdicating.

Though the Soviets had the armed force and the support of the masses, yet the power fell into the hands of the bourgeois Provisional Government. A dual power, rare in history, emerged. Although

th the Bolshevik Revolution. After it, relations between the

est achievement

the Soviets in February and March voluntarily ceded the power won by the soldiers and deputies – a position advocated and pursued by the Mensheviks – the Bolsheviks were not prepared to stop at the victory of the bourgeois revolution.

In August 1917 a Party Congress called for preparations to be made for the transfer of power to the working class and peasantry. By early autumn there was a growing financial collapse and the rouble lost 37 per cent of its value in the period August-September 1917. Workers were paid wages in “falling roubles” – money that simply melted away in their hands.

By October the rouble went into tail-spin, depreciating at headlong speed. Supply of foodstuffs to the cities declined and grain speculators benefited. The government was using armed force against the peasants and backing the big landlords.

In September and October there was a huge upswing in revolutionary strike action with metallurgy and textile workers taking the lead. It began and was strongest in the Bolshevik factories. Demands for the transfer of power to the Soviets began to grow stronger. The Bolsheviks now were returned as the leading force in the overwhelming majority of workers’ soviets. Morale in the army was disintegrating and Bolshevik ideas were coming to the fore. The Bolshevik party had great influence amongst the Kronstadt sailors and the Black Sea Fleet.

And the October Revolution produced two of the best, pithiest calls to action ever: “Peace, Bread and Land” and “All Power to the Soviets” – calls which appealed to millions desperate for power to resolve their problems.

The October Revolution overthrew the Russian Provisional Government and gave the power to the Soviets dominated by Bolsheviks. The revolution was led by the Bolshevik party but with the support of the Left Social Revolutionaries, who had links with the peasantry. At this moment, Lenin made sure that everyone remembered the lessons of the Paris

Commune. Strategic buildings, communication facilities, banks, the railways, the fleets, etc. all needed to be secured for the people. Troops of revolutionary workers and soldiers began the takeover of government buildings on 24 October. On 25 October the Winter Palace (seat of the Provisional government located in Petrograd, then capital of Russia) was captured.

The success of the October Revolution transformed the Russian state from parliamentarian to socialist in character.

What is its significance?

The rulers always denigrate the October Revolution as a coup d’etat. But the evidence is clear that the working class (2 million for instance in Moscow and Petrograd) eagerly adopted the policies of the Bolsheviks during the course of 1917. The brushing aside of the Provisional Government was a popular move and was the only course of action able to address their ability to survive and progress.

For the first time a country detached itself from the ramifications of a capitalist world and began the process of building a socialist society, largely independently, largely out of its own efforts and resources. It was living proof we do not need capitalists. There is another way.

As against current capitalist society’s obsession with celebrity, the October Revolution was the first to put the needs of the mass of workers in central position.

The October Revolution was characterised by its boldness and was an expression of the human spirit that has still not been vanquished.

What events did it set in train?

A coalition of anti-Bolshevik groups including invading armies from the victorious Allies attempted to unseat the new government in the Russian Civil War from 1918 to 1922. It failed. A new army formed from workers’ detachments proved itself in this conflict. Imperialism could not inflict defeat on the fledgling state. The Soviet Union was formed in a

mood of victory.

Another capitalist response was the sponsorship of fascism and corporatism, in the form of Hitler and Nazi Germany, and of Mussolini in Italy. All of which grew out of fear of the working class, and of the Soviet Union in particular.

In the subsequent epic struggle of World War Two, the Soviet Union smashed fascism, changed the tide in the world in favour of the working class. The Soviet Union bore the brunt of the war; two thirds of all Germany’s military divisions served on the eastern front and there was no second front until 1944 when the Soviet Union had turned the balance of the war irrevocably in their favour. This was all at an immense cost to the Soviet Union with an estimated 24 million dead.

Are there still valid lessons for us from those times?

Bourgeois democracy versus revolutionary – Lenin’s formulations. Bourgeois democracy and universal suffrage is not the final culmination of politics. It is a very poor instrument. Sitting back, voting for someone else to represent them, the ancient Greeks listened to debate and then shifted their stones to indicate approval or rejection. Informed participation, constant involvement: the Soviets were the first essay into the arena.

The Soviet Union was not vanquished by capitalism. It withstood everything ranged against it for 73 years. By the 1970s the Soviet Union was producing a fifth of the world’s industrial product. From the Paris Commune’s 72 days to the Soviet Union’s 73 years: noticeable progress for working class power surrounded by adverse, unfriendly powers. Not a coup. A coup doesn’t resist all-comers for 70 years. It collapsed from within. Workers were no longer prepared to be a revolutionary class, exerting leadership over its society.

This article is an edited extract from a speech given at a Workers/CPBML meeting in London in November, celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Settle down over the holiday period for a good read about the schools, academies, the wreck of Britain's railways, and the ethics of social

Three books for thinking over Christmas

The great city academy fraud, by Francis Beckett, hardback, 207 pages, ISBN 978-0-8264-9513-6, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007, £16.99.

In this brilliant book, journalist Francis Beckett exposes Labour's destructive 'city academies' programme.

In the 1980s, Thatcher introduced City Technology Colleges, which opted out of local authority control and had local management and local pay. This caused great inequality and injustice in educational provision. Avon County Council, for example, spent £8 million on 900 pupils at Kingswood in Bristol, leaving just £4.5 million for the county's other 150,000 children.

Labour, when in opposition, denounced this policy, then when in office promoted it. If a local council opposes an academy scheme, Labour deprives it of any money for education. So however the local people vote, for or against academies, they get academies.

The government is ending all democratic control of schools by elected local government. The academies are accountable only to the sponsor. All schools are to be 'independent', destroying our education service.

There are 46 academies now, and the government hopes for 200 by 2011 and 400 later. Those great charities, the "public" schools, are starting to sponsor them. Half of these academies are "faith schools" – divisive and sectarian. Half specialise in "enterprise". In one, every Friday is given over to lessons in "enterprise".

The government is spending £5 billion on its academies programme. It puts an average £25 million into each city academy, the average sponsor just £1 million. In Lewisham, a CTC was turned into a city academy. The Haberdashers' Livery Company put in less than £300,000; the taxpayer paid the rest – £37.7 million. Guess who gets the control.

The government tells us that academies are about putting private money into public education, but really, as in the NHS, public money is going, not into a public service, but through it, into

private companies. Sponsor your local capitalist!

On the wrong line: how ideology and incompetence wrecked Britain's railways, by Christian Wolmar, paperback, 373 pages, ISBN 1-8541-0998-7, Aurum Press, 2005, £10.99.

Christian Wolmar is a respected journalist and author on transport matters. In this excellent book he shows how and why privatising the railways was a disastrous failure.

As he notes, "It is now recognised that the limitations of British Rail were primarily due to low levels of government funding and investment – in fact it delivered the most efficient railway system in Europe in return for the lowest public subsidy." The privatisation nationalised investment and risks while privatising the profits.

Wolmar continues: "The whole ghastly tale of mismanagement, greed and incompetence that caused the Hatfield disaster was a result of the crazy structure for the railways created by John Major and his ministers, aided and abetted by civil servants and, worse, railway managers who should have known better. Hatfield was the epitome of the failings created by railway privatisation. It was also privatisation's epitaph, given that Hatfield turned Railtrack from a profitable company into a financial wreck that had to be bailed out by the government."

Former Tory Minister David Willetts admitted in 2003 that rail privatisation had been a big mistake, in particular that the separation of track from operations had been "ideologically driven and wrong". A Swiss researcher, Carlo Pfund, concluded, "Separation has no benefits. The implementation of the separation philosophy of the EU is a fundamental error."

In opposition, Labour promised a publicly accountable, publicly owned railway. In power, Labour reneged. Annual subsidies to the train operators have risen, to £2 billion in 2003-4, though the government had said they would fall to £800 million by 2002-3.

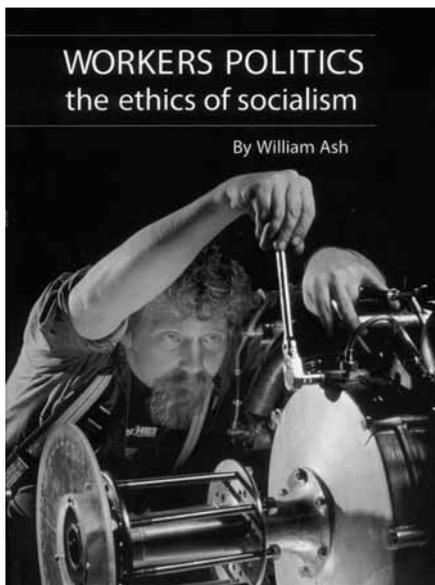
Labour stopped the Strategic Rail Authority from publicising South East Trains' success. As THE TIMES reported, "The SRA is under pressure from the Government not to publicise its success in operating the franchise. Ministers fear that they would face demands to renationalise all rail companies if it became widely known that SET was performing well in the public sector."

Wolmar shows how Labour, by embracing capitalism, made a bad situation worse, as with city academies, PFI/PPP in the NHS, and wars galore. He concludes, "By focusing in detail on a particular case history, this book reveals much about the failure of our political system in preventing such disasters. Hopefully, it will help people stop the bastards next time."



What makes more sense: filling up the roads or investing in and using the railways? Image courtesy ASLEF Who Cares campaign, 2005.

scandal of city
ialism...



Workers Politics: The ethics of socialism, by William Ash, paperback, 340 pages, ISBN 0-9542112-6-X, Bread Books, Coventry, 2007

This in-depth look at the moral necessity for a socialist revolution, and what it means to be a Marxist, was originally published in 1998 in India. Now, with a new preface and neatly coinciding with the sprightly Bill Ash's 90th birthday, it has been published in Britain.

The book is divided into four main chapters: values – what they mean, where they come from; the meaning of normative judgments – that is to say, what makes things “right” or “wrong”; obligations, including a discussion of capitalist freedoms; and alienation and political change. It is essential reading for anyone looking to understand how ethics and morality relate to politics and economics.

The preface, written before Blair had to make way for Brown, and covers the Blair years of rising Thatcherism and subordination to the will of the United States.

Ash's conclusion: “Real socialists have to realise that just as Blair's political rule has become indistinguishable from Thatcher's so ‘social democracy’ under capitalism will always turn into some kind of fascism.”

WHAT'S THE PARTY?

We in the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), and others who want to see a change in the social system we live under, aspire to a society run in such a way as to provide for the needs, and the desires, of working people, not the needs and desires of those who live by the work of others. These latter people we call capitalists and the system they have created we call capitalism. We don't just aspire to change it, we work to achieve that change.

We object to capitalism not because it is unfair and unkind, although it has taken those vices and made virtues out of them. We object because it does not work. It cannot feed everyone, or house them, or provide work for them. We need, and will work to create a system that can.

We object to capitalism not because it is opposed to terrorism; in fact it helped create it. We object because it cannot, or will not, get rid of it. To destroy terrorism you'd have to destroy capitalism, the supporter of the anti-progress forces which lean on terror to survive. We'd have to wait a long time for that.

We object to capitalism not because it says it opposes division in society; it creates both. We object because it has assiduously created immigration to divide workers here, and now wants to take that a dangerous step further, by institutionalising religious difference into division via ‘faith’ schools (actually a contradiction in terms).

Capitalism may be all the nasty things well-meaning citizens say it is. But that's not why we workers must destroy it. We must destroy it because it cannot provide for our futures, our children's futures. We must build our own future, and stop complaining about the mess created in our name.

Time will pass, and just as certainly, change will come. The only constant thing in life is change. Just as new growth replaces decay in the natural world, this foreign body in our lives, the foreign body we call capitalism, will have to be replaced by the new, by the forces of the future, building for themselves and theirs, and not for the few. We can work together to make the time for that oh-so-overdue change come all the closer, all the quicker.

Step aside, Capital. It's our turn now.

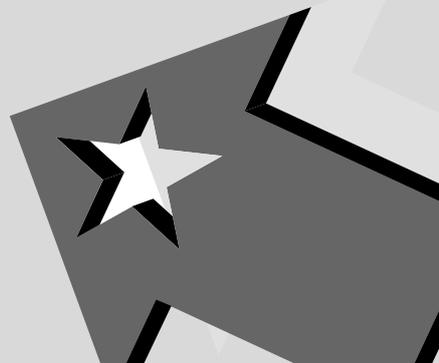
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Back to Front – Thoughts of war

‘They want the EU to develop even further what it has begun: to be an imperial power on the world stage to force open new markets for its own capitalists to exploit...’

IT IS a marker of just how far Labour has come in its open admiration for military aggression and capitalist expansionism, that foreign secretary David Miliband could write the speech he was due to give in Bruges in late November.

In it, he argued for extension of the EU single market to Africa and the Middle East, for the EU to “punch its weight” as a military power by exerting economic influence and military intervention, of “European rules shaping the world”, “the hard power of our sanctions and troops, the power of Europe as an idea and model”. He means war.

Later that week, much was made in the press of how Brown had taken a red pen to the bits about EU military power. So, did Brown really object? Only because it suited him for his office to spin his reservations in the tricky run-up to the proposed signing of the European Treaty/Constitution. You only have to read his Mansion House speech, delivered a few days before Miliband’s, to see what he thinks.

Brown’s soundbite was “hard-headed internationalism”: “The new frontier is that there is no frontier” he said. Forget any attempt to control your lives or your country, was the message, we want a “Global Europe” (yes, really) which will use “hard-headed intervention” to pursue its interests. Whose interests do we imagine he is talking about?

So what happens after the military intervention? Brown called for a “standby civilian force including police and judiciary who can be deployed to rebuild civic societies...to repair damaged economies”. Does this remind you of anything? The “ideal and model” appears to be Iraq. Don’t forget that to many

global companies Iraq has been less a political failure and more a successful opportunity to make enormous profits.

All this talk about “building a global society” is ridiculous, of course. Capitalism is hopelessly incompetent even in trying to run a small country like Britain. It’s ideology Brown is peddling – just as successive British governments have pushed a brutal Thatcherite “free” market model in the EU, they want the EU to develop even further what it has begun: to be an imperial power on the world stage to force open new markets for its own capitalists to exploit.

Thatcher went to Bruges to “handbag” the idea of a European superstate in 1988 but had already signed the Single European Act which accelerated it. It’s no accident that one of Brown’s first acts as PM was to appear at the door of Number 10 for a photocall with Thatcher.

The “idea and model” Miliband wants is capitalist exploitation and pursuit of profit unconstrained by awkward national governments or their peoples. Even cheap Eastern European migrant labour will soon be too expensive – let’s bring in Africa and the Middle East with their huge potential cheap workforces and markets.

So this is Brown’s “big vision”. These are dangerous times indeed – especially given that the British view is shared across EU leaders (see Sarkozy’s call to the EU parliament for military integration backed by an EU “military conscience”). In times of instability, capitalism turns to war to deal with its problems. We will be locked into this nightmare vision in practice by the new Treaty/Constitution if we don’t prevent it by forcing a referendum.

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