

WORKERS

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FIGHTING FOR HOUSING



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WORKERS

“ First thoughts

IT'S KNOWN as the Agenda for Change, a far-reaching agreement on pay and conditions. After more than three years of negotiation, and more than six months of being tested out at twelve “early implementer” sites across Britain, it's coming to decision time for the NHS's 1.3 million workers.

In February the unions and the government review the progress of early implementation, and make proposals for revision and improvement. UNISON's Health Conference in April will defer discussion to a specially convened conference sometime later, to be followed by a ballot of its 400,000 plus members, probably in July.

Many unions have concerns over sections of the NHS — Amicus for pharmacists and some others, the RCN for nurses, the RCM for Midwives and so on — but only UNISON has a responsibility for the whole

of the NHS (apart of course from doctors and medical staff, who have their own negotiating bodies). In UNISON the battle lines are clear: unless we take responsibility for bringing about improvement, we can't be serious about wanting it.

These arguments will be expanded in WORKERS and a wider debate stimulated. In the meantime workers everywhere should be put on guard that the future of the NHS, one of organised workers' greatest achievements, is now to be fought over. Workers controlling their workplace is always what marks out progress, and Agenda for Change is about workers controlling the NHS. Those who want to control it in our interests are for it, or want to improve it. Those who do not are against.

Watch this space! Views from workers in and out of the Health Service are welcome.

Second opinion

THE LAUNCH of Queen Mary 2, French built, at a cost of over £550 million reflects the parlous state of this island's shipbuilding industry. The widest, tallest, longest passenger liner ever built, with 1310 cabins, offers unprecedented luxury with cruising costs ranging from £999 to £28,800 why was the QM2 built in France? Because there is no longer the capacity, skills or ship building facilities available in Britain to build a ship of this size or complexity.

Britain's shipbuilding and repair industries of

commercial and regular seagoing trading fleet generated £1.6 billion in 2003, a drop of nearly 25% on 2002. Yet Britain's luxury leisure ship and yacht building industries generated £1.8 billion in sales during 2003. There are now over 30,000 people employed in building luxury yachts and boats. So an island without a shipbuilding industry? Not quite. Rather a shipbuilding industry geared to the parasites of the world rather than Britain's trade, commerce or fishing needs.



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Cover photo by Andrew Wiard: Camden tenants celebrate ballot victory — see p14

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Samsung cuts and runs

SAMSUNG, the Korean electronic manufacturer, intends closing its state-of-the-art manufacturing unit in Billingham, Middlesbrough and to ship production to China and perhaps Eastern Europe. This is despite the £44 million that Samsung has received since 1995, despite its global turnover of £17.8 billion, from local authority, central government and regeneration funds, with the result that the creation of the 425 jobs in Billingham has been paid for many times over by the British taxpayer. Samsung boasts of record British profits through "unit cost reduction". The company pays its workers just £4.50-5.50p per hour — the minimum wage.

The Billingham factory is the recipient of Samsung's internal international gold medal for productivity — their best factory in the company worldwide. According to its 2003 mission statement for last year, it intended to be the leading British producer of electronic goods such as PC monitors and microwaves. So why the decision to close down the factory? Because, Samsung says, it is too expensive. In China they can pay 0.50p per hour. The deputy managing director of manufacturing, John Slider, said: "The problem is the expense of the UK."

A recent GUARDIAN investigation into the death in Britain in October 2001 of an illegal Chinese worker, who had stamped the word "Samsung" on microwaves for 24 hours solid, has revealed the sweatshop reality of Korean manufacture. British workers refused to work the minimum 72 hour week for minimum wages in the South Korean factories so Chinese workers were recruited through a North Korean refugee, who runs a manpower office in New Malden, south-west London, near to Samsung's UK corporate headquarters. The minimum shift length is 12 hours and in busy periods workers might do 16 or 24 hours. Many work seven days a week and have no contracts or sick pay. The manpower company also runs the workers' hostel — after deductions for rent, food and travel, workers might clear £2.48 an hour.

The closure of the factory and the death of the worker raise important questions for British workers and suggests three lines of approach. Firstly, pressure needs to be put on the government to stop our assets leaving the country — hand-wringing is not good enough; secondly, we must consider how to deal with the undermining of pay and conditions by the use of illegal workers or those from less developed economies who are not union members. This will become a pressing concern shortly as the 10 new accession countries join the EU and their workers will be entitled to work here. The British government has decided to allow workers from these countries in immediately, whereas other EU members have not. Lastly, we need to organise a boycott of all Samsung goods made outside Britain.

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

SHIPBUILDING

Appledore talks stalled

APPLEDORE, the North Devon ship builders and the last remaining British owned yard in England, which collapsed in September 2003, looks to remain closed. Some 550 jobs were lost when the yard went into receivership. Talks on a possible takeover by the nearby Royal Devonport Shipyards appear to be stalled.

There are now only 6 shipbuilding yards operational in Britain, concentrated in Scotland and the North East. Appledore, apart from building super luxury yachts for the rich (now a booming market), appears to have no future.

SECURITY

Guns in the air

BUSH WOULD LIKE to see armed guards (or air marshals as he prefers to call them) on all foreign planes entering American air-space. The British government is one of only a few to agree with this stance. In spite of the opinion of most informed experts on aviation including BALPA (British Airline Pilots Association) the government is still pursuing this hair-brained idea. In a pressurised aircraft the last thing you want is guns going off.

BALPA says that once terrorists are on board an aircraft the situation is already out of control. The point is to try and prevent terrorists from boarding in the first place. A growing number of foreign operators are refusing to comply with Bush's wish. The American government ignores the fact that all the aircraft hijacked on 11 September 2001 were on internal American flights.

RAIL**Disputes in the North**

METRO WORKERS in northern England have been involved in two separate disputes. In Manchester one union is seeking recognition for drivers. In Newcastle workers want a shorter working week.

Aslef members on Manchester's Metrolink system held their second 24-hour strike and held a rally on Saturday 17 January. About 90 of the 340 staff now belong to that union. The employer, Serco (the same "outsourcing" company that runs Bradford's education — see feature, p6), is hiding behind its current single-union agreement with the TGWU. Serco says that negotiating with Aslef would provoke a strike by its other workers.

Aslef and its members want to be directly represented in their own interest. They want to work alongside the TGWU. The TUC dispute committee will hold a hearing at the end of January about the alleged breach of rules. The rail union plans more stoppages if it fails to gain recognition.

In Newcastle metro workers held a one-day strike at the beginning of January. Members of the RMT and Amicus unions have been in a long-running dispute over working hours. They thought they had an agreement in 2002 to reduce the working week from 37 to 35 hours, but the employer, Nexus, refused to implement it. Stoppages were planned over Christmas, but were called off when a deal was made.

The workers rejected the deal, because they did not like conditions that the company attached to the reduction in hours. The employer then withdrew the offer and now says that any deal must look at the whole of the terms and conditions, which they believe are "among the best" for the region.

- A suppressed government report shows that Britain's railways are in an even worse state than previously thought. The annual report of the Strategic Rail Authority shows a ramshackle network that lurches from one crisis to another.

The fourth re-write of the government's 10-year plan has been binned because it needs far more than the £64 billion envisaged to fund it. Among the projects that have failed to secure investment are the urgent renewal of ageing main lines between London and Edinburgh and from London to the West Country and Wales.

Awaiting approval are the trans-London Crossrail and Thameslink 2000 schemes and the East London Line Extension integral to the bid for the 2012 Olympics.

YOUTH WORKERS**Crunch time over pay**

THE COMMUNITY and Youth Workers Union is holding a national ballot of members on terms and conditions. Members must decide between industrial action short of a strike or strike action in furtherance of their claim.

Youth workers are looking for more than 3% on pay, the introduction of a scale for advanced practitioners to help the service to retain experienced face-to-face practitioners and the withdrawal of proposals to lower entry qualification levels.

The union has highlighted the fact that 4,000 more youth workers are needed to

meet government staffing targets and that most local authorities have redirected government money allocated for the Youth Service to other things. While young people with academic aspirations are now being hit by proposals for top-up fees, those who need support and different forms of education in their localities are being hit by cuts in the Youth Service.

Meanwhile managers invent new ways of spending money on corporate gear and lunches or, in the case of Sheffield, on redundancies. And of course youth workers in every locality are expected to do a more difficult job with new demanding targets for less and less pay.

Too much is being asked of too few for too little and it is time that youth workers made the employers see sense.

From farce to fiasco

THE DISPUTE by public service workers in UNISON, the TGWU and the GMB over the London Weighting Allowance moved from farce to fiasco last month as the employers walked out and tried to 'suspend' the Greater London Provincial Council. This is the joint negotiating forum, which cannot be 'suspended' by one party acting unilaterally.

The two year dispute has seen the ebbing away of support for the strike days and other industrial action. It has seen the TGWU and GMB desert the dispute, be coaxed back in, break ranks and re-unite. Falling support and lack of strike funds means a re-think of tactics is needed. What was supposed to be a face-saving strategy — a reference to ACAS for conciliation and binding arbitration — has misfired as the employers walked out.

Instead of a tactical withdrawal by all concerned from a flawed strategy, the dispute staggers on and on. Perhaps the script for the dispute was stapled in the wrong order. For example, references to ACAS usually occur at the beginning of a dispute, or at least come from a position of industrial strength rather than one of weakness. Lobbying of Council budget meetings and model resolutions to branch AGMs are the tactics from two years ago. The farce of pursuing a poorly supported early day motion in the House of Commons is a waste of time.

Meanwhile, the local council's assault against the Newham UNISON branch leadership continues. The destruction of facilities, the undermining of the branch and threats to union subscriptions have still not been seen off despite the "consultative" ballot for strike action to defend the branch officers. The Newham Branch leadership provided the backbone of the London-wide dispute but a flawed strategy has led to its isolation.

If the Local Government Pay Commission recommends significant improvements in London Weighting, then a lot of London local government workers will scratch their heads and wonder what the last two years' dispute has been about.

MADE IN BRITAIN?**You'll never know**

THE EUROPEAN Commission is proposing to re-label origins of all produce in Europe. By substituting "Made in the EU" for labels of origin — such as "Made in Britain" (or another country) the EU Commissioners are trying to push through further integration.

Not only will goods be stripped of the national identity or selling characteristics

— for example French perfume, Scottish Whisky, or English cloth — but production could be anywhere within the EU.

Transfer of production will follow from these changes to the source of cheapest labour: Eastern Europe. This would destroy quality, skills and communities of production established over centuries. "Off-shoring" means transferring of work anywhere in the world where technology can provide a service. "Off-labelling" will further strip any identity a worker has with what they produce or where.

Civil servants vote to walk out

IN THE FACE of firm resistance from the government, civil servants have voted for walkouts over pay. Members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) will strike on 29 and 30 January. Their union believes that below-inflation pay offers can be improved.

Up to five departments could be affected, covering benefit offices, job centres, courts, immigration service and prisons. Each department had separate pay talks and ballots. But all were faced with hard line attitudes from management, which workers believe is dictated by government.

The union says there is a high proportion of low paid workers in these jobs, and they need more than the small rises offered. They believed that previous deals committed the employers to look positively at pay structures. The government have cracked down on any moves to shorten pay scales at a time when its finances are under pressure.

For example the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) imposed an offer worth 2.6% overall. The employer claims that many will get more than this. The union believes that is playing with figures and is concerned about the many who will get less. Other offers have been for lower amounts than that made by DWP.

Each group of workers will decide separately what action to take, but they hope to co-ordinate pressure on ministers. Management are making the most of low turnouts in the postal ballots. The union wants dialogue over long-term pay problems but is willing to take action if talks fail. The response of members to the initial strike call is likely to be crucial in determining the outcome of this pay campaign.



Photo: Andrew Wiard

THOUSANDS of students protesting against top-up fees in London on 26 October 2003. The call for the return of student grants is of central importance because, unlike Thatcher and Blair, it supports "society". Complicated arguments concerning universities' income shortfall or students' future earnings are irrelevant. Universities and students don't exist just for the benefit of individuals, any more than do schools.

MINING

More jobs — at a price

ONLY ONE DEEP mine exists in what was the North Yorkshire coalfield — Kellingley, the 'Big K'. Only 550 miners remain — a reduction of 75% during the last 20 years. Between 137 and 240 jobs are to be created at Kellingley for men from the closing Selby complex.

But the jobs come at a price. The five-

day working agreement is to be scrapped for seven-day working with 12-hour shifts at weekends and the scrapping of overtime.

Naturally the NUM is incensed at this attack on long-established working conditions. But hard choices have to be faced. Saving jobs and scrapping overtime means keeping more miners in the industry. More miners' jobs mean seedcorn for a future revival of the industry by preserving the skills and fraternity among the workforce.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

FEBRUARY

Tuesday 10 February, 7pm

Win Direct Investment in Council Housing

Organised by Camden Defend Council Housing (see article, p14). Camden Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1 (near Euston/King's Cross tubes).

Saturday 28 February, 10am

Stop The War 3rd Annual Conference

Camden Centre, Euston Road WC1 (opposite Kings Cross station), London. For more information, see www.stopwar.org.uk

NURSING

Action call on shortage

UNISON has called for international action to address the global shortage of nurses. The Department of Health has drawn up a code of practice intending to prevent the stripping of nurses and other health professionals from so-called third world countries by NHS Trusts in the UK. But the reality is that Britain has recruited over 35,000 Filipino nurses and stripped Zimbabwe, South Africa and West Africa of skilled and trainee nurses.

There would not be a shortage of nurses if the planning, training, recruitment and proper payment of nurses in Britain were put into place. If nurses' homes had not been sold off during the last 15 years, then there would not be the crisis of unaffordable housing in our major cities.

International action means starting at home and demanding jobs and training for staff here.

- TWENTY-FOUR student nurses, members of UNISON as well as college lecturers and domestic staff are campaigning to keep their nurses' home open in the face of threatened eviction. The nurses and staff at the Nurses Home 3, St Andrews Hospital, Newham, are threatened with eviction under the PFI proposals affecting Newham Healthcare Trust.

The campaign is targeting Newham Healthcare Trust and also the City University. A campaign is already under way with petitions in Newham and London healthcare branches. There are plans for a lobby and vigil of Parliament and a candlelit procession in early February.

The Eurozone isn't working

A EUROPEAN COMMISSION report presented to the European Parliament on 21 January 2004 illustrates how misguided trade unions would be to continue to look to the Eurozone for jobs. The EU had promised to become "the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010", and the euro was supposed to be the key.

Now, it seems, it will fall far short of that. Comparing the EU with the US, the report states "there are significant problems which hold back the entire strategy and which hinder the return of strong growth".

Lagging behind

The report goes on to say that the main areas where the EU lags behind are jobs, productivity and investment. On the jobs front, it says the intermediate target will not be met by 2005. And only if there is an "economic upturn" comparable with the end of the 1990s, it says, will final targets be met.

Apart from the circular argument, one might ask, what economic upturn? If there was one, it certainly went unnoticed by workers, as job loss and the export of jobs gained momentum.

In terms of productivity in the EU, the report says the growth rate is actually declining. It is fluctuating between 0.5% and 1%, far behind the 2% achieved by the US. Public investment is also falling and is far below the US levels.

Standstill

The report concludes: "The European Union's efforts to catch up with the United States are at a standstill."

This is a curious state of affairs in view of the fact that the US economy is at its lowest ebb for a decade, not least because of military expenditure. It only serves to show that prospects are even worse for the people of Europe than appears on paper.

And who is to blame for this sorry outcome? The Commission, for painting a false rosy picture as bait to lure new members in? Or the member states themselves?

True to form, the EC lashes out at the members. It's the old capitalist trick of blaming the workers. EU governments are being urged to ignore the aspirations of their electorates; instead, they "must use the spring summit in March to push through some meaningful reform measures". In other words, work harder for less.

With the local education authority so bad, I thought privatisation couldn't be worse. A

Contracting out fails Bradford

IT'S JUST TWO YEARS since control of the education service in Bradford was seized from the local education authority and handed to a private company. The takeover was with the active connivance of the government after a damning Ofsted inspection of the authority.

The private company now running Bradford's education service, Serco, is jack of many trades, from the management of parking meters and rail services to the testing of nuclear weapons. Not necessarily the most appropriate background for an organisation seeking a contract to deliver educational services, but as has become clear, there are plenty of private outfits ready to fill the void and take what pickings are on offer when the government increasingly distances itself from the provision of essential services.

Education workers and parents in Bradford shed no tears over the demise of an LEA that had lost their respect. The response could be summed up in a sentence: "Let Serco have a go; they can't do any worse than the last lot." Warnings from unions and others that privatisation was dangerous went largely unheeded.

Now that Serco is entering the third year of its 10-year contract, it is time to take stock. Worth £320 million, the contract stipulates that the company will be paid only if targets designed to lift Bradford from the bottom of the education league tables are met. It now emerges that in their first year only 5 of the 52 targets were met, and of a possible £1 million in bonuses, the company received £8,450.

Serco, of course, is in this not for love but for money. Achieving 0.85 per cent of their financial target clearly represents catastrophic failure. Accordingly, for the second year of the contract, with £2.2 million in bonuses on offer, the company approached Bradford Council (who retain a titular overseeing role) with a plan — not to improve services, but to revise targets downwards. In this way, the bonuses become achievable without the necessity of any accompanying improvements — not so much a case of moving the goal posts, as removing them altogether.

Had a public enterprise missed its

targets by so wide a mark, they would have been pilloried and — as happened to Bradford LEA — removed from the job. But different rules apply to the government's friends in the private sector. Bradford Council responded to Serco's breathtaking arrogance with characteristic spinelessness and agreed the target revisions.

For the third year of the contract, in a desperate bid to put a good gloss on its privatisation adventures, the government has appointed a taskforce to step in and help turn around struggling schools. There are thought to be 22 schools in Bradford receiving special measures or with serious weaknesses and thus giving extreme cause for concern. And of course this taskforce, named the School Improvement Partnership Board, brings with it an injection of extra government cash.

Discontents

On the ground, in staffrooms and in governors' meetings, discontents are beginning to surface with increasing regularity. Serco is coming to be perceived as a company that is long on promises but short on delivery. There is a lack of accountability within the company leading to a failure to carry out simple tasks. An example of this failure came to light recently concerning the system for dealing with assaults on teachers.

Under the previous administration, victims of violence in schools completed a form and sent it off to the LEA, which duly sent copies to union offices so that members could be given appropriate support and advice. When Serco took over, the flow of these forms to the unions stopped. Knowing that some teachers were still experiencing violence at work, the unions set about investigating how the system had broken down. The shoulder shrugging, "it's not my job" mentality within Serco meant that months went by without a resolution. Eventually, a box full of the forms was found at head office, but it took many more months before an effective system was reintroduced.

Anecdotes like this abound, and taken together paint a picture of a failure to accept responsibility that has characterised

some Bradford people
mistake...

d education

this particular experiment in privatisation.

An echo of the previous council culture is the abuse of public funds to reward and promote private interest groups. A recent illustration, reported in the local press at the end of last year, drew derision and disbelief in equal measure. As Bradford toiled in autumnal wind and fog, it was revealed that a team of head teachers was being sent to the Caribbean on a fact-finding mission. Their purpose: to discover the causes of relative low achievement among Afro-Caribbean children in Bradford schools. A head confessed, rather shamefacedly, that he had only one such child in his school. One wag was prompted to respond in the press: "What of the heads with children of Afghani origin? No fact-finding mission for them?"

The truth of course is that pupil underachievement is a feature of many schools throughout this country. It is a British problem and will require a British solution. It poses a serious challenge to teachers, governors, parents, councillors and all who have a stake in education. Is there any hope for the children in an area like Bradford?

Unemployment

The problems of the Bradford area are well documented. A former industrial powerhouse, Bradford has seen its industrial base almost entirely removed in the last third of the 20th century. Consequent mass unemployment, often to the second or third generation, has stripped families of the positive, civilising influence of the world of work and has brought in its wake hopelessness and dependency. In such an atmosphere, despair can take root and lack of aspiration rubs off on many children who see no future beyond benefits and therefore no point in schooling.

Coupled with this is the exacerbating problem of poor English for many with an Indian or Pakistani background. Thirty years ago, Bradford had a number of "language centres" where children with limited or no English were schooled in the basics of the language in order to make a successful transition to mainstream

Photo: Workers



City Hall, Bradford: two years ago it lost control of its education service

schools. Despite their success, the centres were closed down in the name of anti-racism and supplanted by the promotion of bi-lingualism, which did nothing but make a virtue out of a faltering grasp of two languages.

In such an atmosphere there developed a mode of thinking within the council, mirrored by many workers in the education service, which defended underachievement as an inevitable consequence of external factors and paraded as a badge of honour along the lines of: "See how much more downtrodden we are than you."

To argue, as many do, that Bradford's problems are intractable offers little solace to the children. Many reason that the problems are too vast and too deeply embedded and conclude: "We just have to make the best of a bad job". Others, from a different perspective, point the finger at privatisation or capitalism and say: "Wait till we've had a revolution, then we'll sort this mess out." Such a unity of left and right with all latter day Jeremiahs singing the same song: "No hope for you"!

For those who have lived and worked in Bradford under both regimes, it will not do

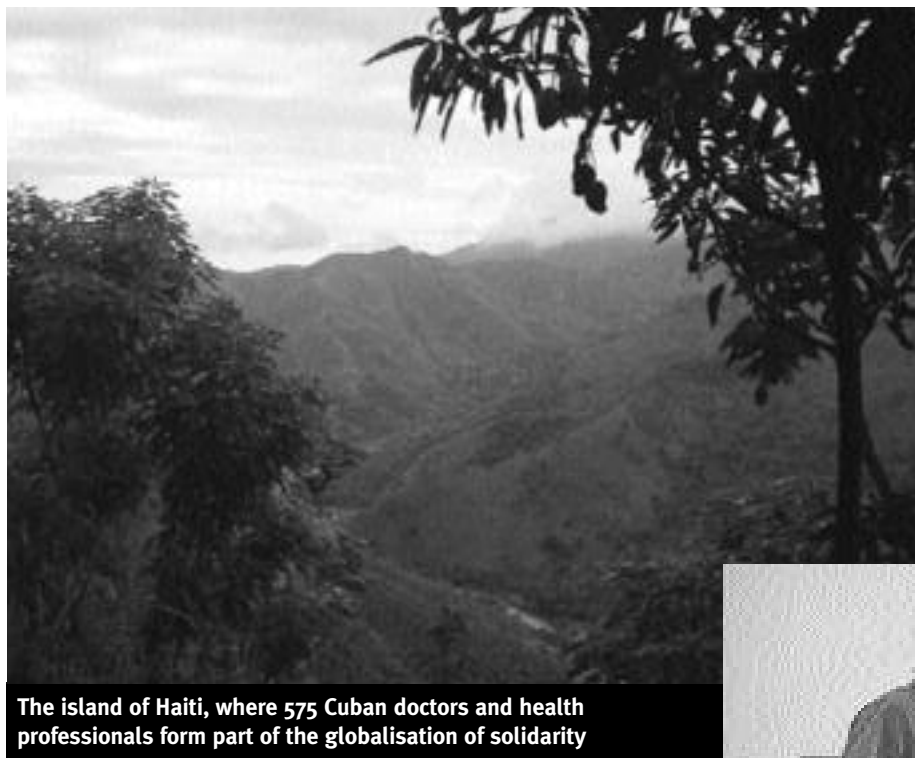
to say "Public-good, private-bad." Both were bad. The old LEA thought education existed to give them jobs. Serco believes education exists to give them profit. One corruption has been replaced by another.

Is there a way forward out of this morass? Certainly there is, as long as there are teachers, governors and parents who are prepared to say: "We know what is needed." Those who work in education or are custodians of it appreciate what could be done if they were free to get on with it. As yet they have drawn the line at making such a public declaration, but time is running out. The honeymoon for Serco is over. They are failing, as did their predecessors.

What happens next? Certainly Serco cannot be allowed to blunder along as it is for another seven years. What will replace it? A revitalised and accountable LEA? A not-for-profit trust? The detail is unclear. What is imperative is that, whatever the shape of the new provider, those who accept responsibility for education must say with one voice, not "What are you going to give us?" but "This is what we need to do the job!"

WORKERS has had unprecedented access to the Cuban Medical Co Africa. Here we present an exclusive look at the workings of the

Cuba's heroes in Haiti



Photos: Workers

The island of Haiti, where 575 Cuban doctors and health professionals form part of the globalisation of solidarity

IN 1999 HURRICANE George devastated Haiti, followed by Hurricane Mitch, which destroyed much of Honduras and Nicaragua. More than 60,000 people lost their lives and other countries suffered extensive material damage. Cuba, along with many other countries, sent doctors to help the survivors. Its Ernesto Che Guevara Cuban Medical Brigade has been in Haiti ever since.

After a month, most other aid agencies departed but the Cuban doctors remained despite the fact that there were no diplomatic relations and a history of hostility. Cuba appealed to the rich countries to send technical and pharmaceutical aid, but this appeal fell on deaf ears.

Globalisation of solidarity

Cuba decided that it would develop a strategy to save at least 60,000 lives in the region as its contribution of solidarity. The Cuban Naval Academy west of Havana was closed and converted into the Latin American School of Medicine to

provide medical training, free of charge, to poor students from Latin America and Africa.

This was followed by the establishment of the Caribbean Medical School in Santiago de Cuba.

The medical school provided free training, using the Cuban five-year training programme, for poor students from French and English speaking Caribbean countries. Cuba then offered to send its own doctors and health care professionals to poor countries free of charge.

This concept began to be known as "globalisation of solidarity" at a time when neo-liberal globalisation was seen as the biggest threat to these countries.

The Ernesto Che Guevara Cuban Medical Brigade in Haiti comprises 575 doctors and health professionals and

operates the same Integral Health Programme, based on the Cuban domestic model, as the brigades in 62 other countries from Paraguay to the US(!) and from Venezuela to Cambodia. The model is the same (adapted to each country's needs) and only the numbers vary, from 1 in Cambodia working with a team of Cambodian professionals to 10,169 in Venezuela.

The brigade in Haiti consists of a national and departmental (provincial) structure with smaller units in remote localities and covers 70% of the Haitian population.

The work of each unit starts with a comprehensive analysis of the health situation especially the various risks to



health and the existing resources. This is followed, where possible, by measures to ensure clean drinking water, improved diet, sanitation and sewage disposal and by making visits to every house in the locality. This would probably be the first time that most Haitians have been visited by or even met a doctor.

On their visits, the doctors see every member of the household and make basic health checks. They then organise various "circles" for the elderly, for those with hypertension, for pregnant women, adolescents and children, to discuss and identify other risks and find solutions.

Collaboration programme in Latin America, the Caribbean and globalisation of solidarity...

'Cuba offered to send its own health care professionals to poor countries free of charge...'

Some medical problems may require surgery, but other solutions can be as basic as exercise, prenatal examinations, use of condoms, or improved family hygiene.

The brigades are composed of mainly young people, many of whom studied together in the same medical school, along with some very experienced professionals. They include specialists in general medicine, internal medicine, orthopaedics, neuro and general surgery, paediatricians, gynaecologists, obstetricians, technicians and other professionals.

In each brigade there are commissions for scientific advice, care of the gravely ill, quality, defence advice, finance, discipline and emulation. Their analyses include a detailed breakdown of the main causes of death, types and causes of disabilities and infectious diseases, methods of control of pre and postnatal risks, and infant and maternal mortality.

Because of the shortage of medicines, each brigade grows its own plot of medicinal herbs.

Professionalism

The Cuban Health Workers Union (SNTS) is in the vanguard of this strategy. The Cuban doctors are committed to expanding the frontiers of medicine and of science and to providing health care to the poor of the world as well as to the Cuban people — despite personal risk of malaria and dengue and the need for two year absences from home.

They are also committed to their country, the Cuban revolution and to their union. In the corner of every brigade house is a "patriotic corner", with their flag and items reminding them of Cuba.



Since the Cuban Medical Brigade went into Haiti, it has saved over 80,000 lives



Brigades are composed mainly of young people, many fellow students when they were at medical school

They are politically organised.

This is revolutionary professionalism in practice, only possible because of the revolutionary professionalism of their union. In Haiti, this professionalism has resulted in a verified saving of 81,856 lives since the Cuban Medical Brigade first went to the country. If the same model is at work in 62 countries, the mind boggles at the scale of the contribution of Cuban globalised solidarity.

Just compare this with the scale of destruction wrought on the world by the British and US globalisation — and the governments in these countries have the

nerve to call for regime change in Cuba! At the same time it is easy to see why they fear Cuba with its combination of working class ideology, patriotism and revolutionary professionalism.

The ultimate sustainability

To sustain the levels of health care, part of the arrangement with the Haitian government is that young Haitians from the poor areas where the Cubans are currently working will be selected by their

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government to be trained as doctors and health professionals. The training will take place either in Cuba or by the Cubans in Haiti.

The intention is that the trained Haitians will return to their poor areas to work for a minimum of 3 years. So far 161 young Haitians have graduated as specialists in Integral General Medicine from the Cuban Medical Faculty in Port au Prince, Haiti, and a further 632 are studying at the Caribbean Medical School in Santiago de Cuba. As they are all being trained in the Cuban model, it is hoped that they will develop the same revolutionary professionalism as the Cubans.

An internal Haitian problem

Haitian President Aristedes, a former Catholic priest, has said that there are stars in the sky and on the earth — those on the earth are the Cuban doctors. There is no voluntary inclusive political tradition or institutions in Haiti, a country of grinding poverty.

It is said that the only thing that holds the Haitians together is their Vodou religion. Most Haitian leaders have either left the country with the nation's treasury, or have died in the process of trying to.

In his first term as Haiti's first elected

President, Aristedes was overthrown by the army. When he was reinstated by the UN and the US, he abolished the army, except for the ceremonial band.

The opposition to him today is partly manipulated by those former elements and also by the heirs of Baron Samedi, the Keeper of the Cemeteries — Papa Doc Duvalier, whose feared Tonton Macoute never surrendered their guns under the UN/US deal — only their dark glasses.

The World Bank and the IMF have offered Haiti loans, but Aristedes has refused to accept them because of the conditions, which include full privatisation of the public sector.

The Cubans, however, maintain absolute strict political neutrality in Haiti, describing recent events as an internal Haitian problem. They are allowed safe passage by both sides, who know that it is the Cubans who will end up having to treat their bullet wounds and operate on them.

But it's not only about doctors. Cuba has cooperation projects in Haiti in the fields of water, veterinary science, roads, construction, education, science, sugar and specialist training.

And in Britain?

The British government takes the view that Haiti does not exist and that Cubans have no human rights. Yet Britain has a shortage of doctors and has had to poach

them from developing countries. How is it possible for a poor Caribbean island like socialist Cuba to train more than enough doctors for its own needs and offer thousands of its doctors to poor countries? How is it that Cuba can offer free medical training to thousands of poor overseas youngsters? How is it possible that nearly 500 poor black Americans from the Bronx are studying in Havana to be doctors — free of charge?

By September this year, Bush will be threatening Cuba with regime change in an attempt to win the votes of the Cuban Mafia in Florida who claim to have built little Havana in Miami. Well, here's news for them. Cuba has built little Cuba in 62 countries, most of whom have now established full diplomatic relations.

Otto Reich, Bush's representative for Latin America and a former organiser of anti Cuban terrorism, recently threatened to intervene in Venezuela because of the growing number of "military style" Cubans in the country. Cuban President Fidel Castro responded that the doctors were there at the invitation of the Venezuelan government, and if the US would replace Cuba's 10,169 doctors in Venezuela with American doctors, Cuba would gladly withdraw them.

Cuba's globalisation of solidarity should serve as an example to those thousands of mainly young people from Britain and other countries wanting to oppose neo-liberal globalisation, but who are being channelled into forums, marches and riots in exotic locations.

As slaves from Africa the Cubans secretly hid their African religion behind Catholicism. In 1974, they responded to a request from Angola to send 30,000 volunteer fighters to repel the South African invasion of that country without the US or South Africa knowing. It was the best kept secret in the world — only 11 million Cubans knew about it.

Now they've done it again. They have combined revolutionary professionalism, solidarity, selflessness, patriotism and the ability to undermine the beast. It is time that the working class of the world knew about it and supported it.

US prepares for action against Cuba

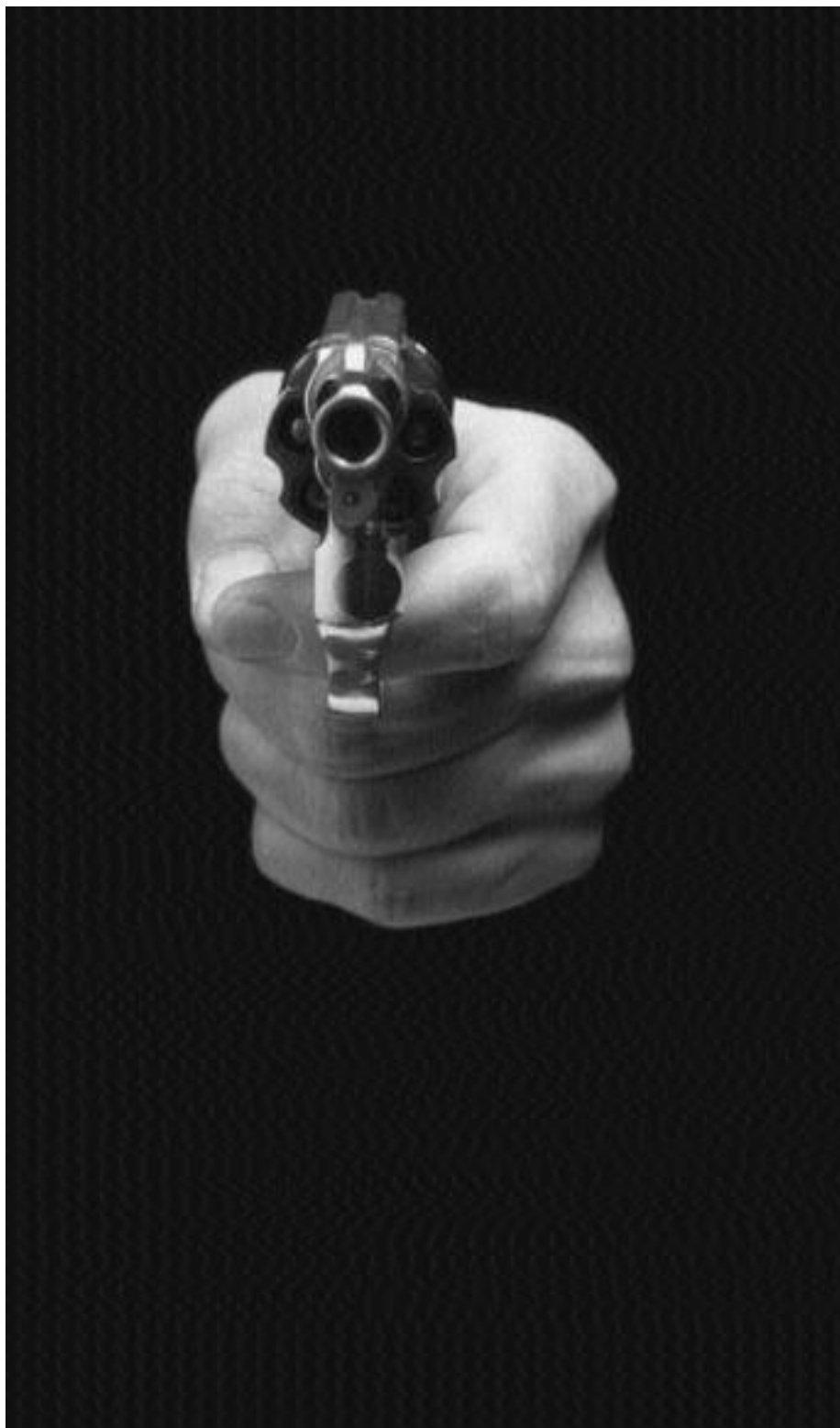
THE TUC CONGRESS in Brighton last year unanimously supported work to ensure that Cuba was not invaded and that the British government stayed well clear of Bush's plans before it was too late. There is now a real need to ensure that this policy is implemented.

Bush's recent statements that Cuba's lack of democracy is a real problem should be seen for what they are — a reflection of his military intentions. If Britain made it clear to Bush that we were not happy with this aggression against Cuba, Bush would have to go on the back foot, but as yet Blair refuses to criticise.

Solidarity with Cuba will be extremely difficult the more that war preparations escalate unless we force the issue at home. Cuba could be invaded more quickly and more viciously than Iraq and with greater venom, hence the vital importance of pre-emptive work here. Pressure on the government and a presence at the American embassy is needed.

There is an antidote to the US-led culture of violence and war: working class culture shows the power of real ideas...

Culture clash: reality or virtual reality?



YOU BUY your kids a science set for Christmas and immediately the shape of the microscope suggests in the child's mind a mock handgun. The telescope of course, with its handy tripod, is an excellent bazooka. Instead of quiet contemplation, you have a house resounding with rocket fire and mass murder. The books you would love them to read are not so easily transformed, so they are discarded and out comes the latest computer game in which the contestants must kill, maim, bomb and destroy or ruthlessly compete by racing gas-guzzling cars, between spectacular crashes, of course.

Escaping from violent Xmas

You escape dark thoughts about the evil influence of the pervasive images of violence, deviant behaviour and waste and turn on the telly to try and relax. But you are immediately confronted by the staple diet of mindless viewing made mostly in the USA.

The most frequent images and story lines beamed into yours and a billion other households are: talking on the phone (rather than directly to someone), driving a car, car crashes, killing another human. The law enforcement agencies, whether Wyatt Earp or Ironside or Cagney and Lacey, always get the criminal and thereby restore our faith in the power of the punitive state.

If you think about the relationships between characters in most American cartoons, they merely represent dysfunctional families. There is not a loving relationship in sight. If you think about it most of the characters in US products are callous, weird, or inhuman. It is usually state-backed or privatised super heroes whose role is to safeguard the good from the weird. And — this is the weird thing — though people are depicted in the typically Christian way as full of sin, they are not conquered with love. America's heroes are the toughest and best armed. Its cultural images

Continued on page 12



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reflect its real military might and imperialist ambitions.

Dream on

It is a strange world we only half recognise. Even *THE WALTONS* represented a dream that the American Depression

destroyed — the stable, employed family. Real history gets rewritten — it wasn't "night night Jim Bob" for millions of workers at that time. Going back further, 15 million innocent Native Americans were really slaughtered by the lawless, so Hollywood must distort history and depict the "Red Indian" as the savage menace to every new generation.

Long before 11 September, the

Americans were partial to major disaster movies, reflecting their culture's paranoia about the fundamental insecurity inherent in rampant, unregulated capitalism. This is why, as you watched the planes crashing into the towers, at first it seemed less convincing than the special effects you have seen in a dozen films and just about as plausible.

Ideas and reality

Our ideas and consciousness of ourselves are shaped by social existence, said Marx. He never said the workplace or the economy determined our thinking.

Social existence is very complex these days. We intercommunicate and receive images of ourselves and our society in a way never known before. We do not produce these received images ourselves out of our real experience; we consume them through the US-dominated entertainments market.

Our social existence is saturated by what you might call "fiction" — games, arts, adverts, TV shows, films, etc, which means we need to understand how fiction works on us in order to understand our world — how it is and how it should be.

Sometimes this is referred to as cultural criticism. As people's identity and place in the world is increasingly defined through cultural forces, a working class needs such a critical approach to shape its class consciousness. It is no accident that most of the market driven images and fictional 'stories' we are bombarded with seek to reduce our sense of class and solidarity.

The ideal worker

In reality, class consciousness no longer emerges from stable, large workplaces of skilled workers in rooted communities. Excellent studies have been done on the effect on personality and character of the unstable, flexible, deskilled labour

market that has been created.

People's ideas and the way in which they are formed and how they see themselves have changed as the structure of work has changed. Mass migrations best reflect the instability of the new subservience capitalism would like to create everywhere. The migrant worker is the classic stateless, unorganised proletarian.

Postmodernist reaction

So complex has social existence become that some, who called themselves post modernists, denied it could have any rationale, logic, history, consistency, or moral purpose. Studying Shakespeare for them was no more or less important than analysing hairstyles. They built academic careers on denying the stable, the ethical, the hierarchical, the rooted and the material. They wrote sentences in books for each other, which were like elaborate cryptic codes as if knowledge was a privatised secret rather than a thing to be shared.

Like the modernists before them they stuck together references to the flotsam and jetsam of world cultures to prove how clever they were.

While denying the need to criticise the world politically and economically, they endorsed the status quo of the market place as it bombards us with fiction and image and fantasy to deny reality. Cultural critics of this sort come and go like their own fads, writing about writing and the signs and superficial appearances of the world.

Change or status quo

But in the struggle to change the social order, there is always a battle of ideas, which covers as wide a terrain as human endeavour. There is recognition within this battle that ideas are never enough. Ideas only change things if linked to action and organisation. It is no good lamenting the terrible state of the world unless your critical ideas are linked to practical activity to change a situation.

'It is no good lamenting the terrible state of the world unless your critical ideas are linked to practical activity to change a situation...'

"Idealism" was something that communists from Marx onwards described as an exaggeration of the power of single ideas in describing or determining events. "God created Man and the Universe" simply does not stand up in an age of advanced cosmology and the human genome project.

Similarly, Marxist ideas — for instance the realisation that there are only two classes in Britain — mean little unless they are linked to working class organisation geared towards gaining power for running society differently in the future. Without this aim, such ideas become idealist, simple description forming part of the status quo rather than a challenge to it. However good, any idea can lead to mistakes of idealism if it becomes fixed, repeated as dogma.

Critical reflection

Active, critical reflection on what we do, so natural in any productive work process and in scientific research and exploration, is one of the keys to change, and it is precisely against this communist pattern of thought, that the cultural industry of capitalism works. It creates forms of participation in culture in which the audience is constantly the passive recipient of images so far removed from reality as to make any reflection on our real world an impossible stretch of the imagination.

Consider the popularity of LORD OF THE

RINGS and HARRY POTTER. Or, as in the common Americanised pattern, bourgeois culture portrays subliminal images of flawed and sinning mankind — the serial killers, robbers and crime gangs who scare us to death — but the humanity of man is constantly saved by the agent of the state who restores order by jailing or killing the chain saw maniac, or the alien terminator who has temporarily disrupted our comfortable world.

Such anarchic, meaningless fantasy, or the armed rule of law, provides something or anything to divert us away from reflecting critically on our own circumstances. Instead, we are meant to pick up a gun to defend ourselves against the bogeyman who could be our brother or sister in the real world.

Real change

Every thought that authentically relates to our real, lived world and the ideas and images we create of ourselves for ourselves represents part of the struggle of ideas to assert our own culture and our own world and our own real sense of our place within it. In reality, if we don't work we don't survive and while at work we create fortunes for our employers. Without us they are nothing, yet they have the power so long as we allow.

The most important focus for this set of New Year's resolutions must be to look at the real world and real ideas which would seek to tip the balance of forces in our favour as workers. There is no place this year for virtual reality, fantasy and self-delusion.

The suicide bomber terrorist has swallowed bourgeois culture whole, taking it to its logical extreme. He says, "There is nothing I can do in this world, so I will kill myself and other workers for the greater glory of a non-existent god in hope of a non-existent fantasy paradise after my death." How does this differ from the negative, escapist, dead-end message we soak up from foreign bourgeois culture?

The government thought it was all set up. A compliant council, and an even larger stick. But then the tenants organised themselves

Camden tenants win victory for council housing

COUNCIL HOUSE TENANTS and leaseholders in the London Borough of Camden have voted overwhelmingly to keep 33,000 homes under public control. A decisive 77% NO to takeover by an independent housing corporation called an "Arms-Length Management Organisation" (Almo) has shattered the government's dream of offloading its housing responsibilities onto profiteers.

The tenants' organisation, Defend Council Housing (DCH), backed by Unison, has sent a clear signal to tenants in other parts of the country that, if the flagship can be scuppered, they can win too. After the High Court declared the ballot lawful, Camden Leader Jane Roberts was forced to admit "the Almo is a dead duck". The poll has plunged the Council into crisis. They had spent much time and undisclosed amounts of money on glossy propaganda.

Camden had been rated a top performer and its Leader was created a dame for her willingness to allow the borough to be used to pilot government

schemes. They expected to win. After all, this is a government that knows what's best for us. As with student fees, foreign policy, the imposition of undemocratic cabinet-style local government, and so much else, Blair believes religiously in his ultimate ability to argue some sense into workers, whom he views as ignorant and conservative. But the magic no longer works — he is increasingly embattled with a working class that can think for itself.

Independent

Camden tenants have shown themselves independent-minded enough to resist years of blandishments, blackmail and bribery. The options of stock transfer and Private Finance Initiatives were both rejected. They were then told that only an Almo could "unlock" the £283 million of Treasury money needed for maintaining and modernising their homes.

A shadow board met behind closed doors to prepare the groundwork for what would emerge as a trading company,

selling services to leaseholders and other authorities.

Tenants were assured that transfer was not the same as privatisation, as the company would initially be owned by the Council. This ignored the fact that it could easily be sold off. Formerly esteemed councillors turned government agents warned there was no fourth option.

This was a "once in a generation" opportunity; a vote against would be "playing poker" with the future of their homes; it would mean "patch-16

and-make-do repairs" and no new kitchens and bathrooms, or handrails for the elderly. If they refused to support Camden's bid, "their money" would instead go to Islington or Hammersmith & Fulham — boroughs which had recently signed up to an Almo. Show flats were exhibited to demonstrate what tenants would be missing — but council workers refused to staff them.

Rumours abounded of corrupt officials and the gagging of tenants' representatives. Unions threatened action. In a Commons debate, Prescott (perhaps unwittingly) was forced to blow the Town Hall's cover — albeit with a lukewarm offer: "We will try to provide adequate funding for those who want to stay with their local authorities." And local MP Frank Dobson — no doubt still smarting from Labour losses in local elections — accused the government of putting a gun to the council's head.

DCH ran an informative campaign, pointing out what a lucrative and viable business council housing is. Private companies can't wait to get their hands on estates, and regularly target them with letters inviting sales. Nationally, just over half the amount of rent from 3.6 million tenants is spent on managing, maintaining and improving homes. The rest — some £1000 per tenant per annum — goes to the government. This has been described as a hidden tax on the poorest in the land. Money from right-to buy sales amounts to £3 billion.

New government rules on rent are set to force levels above inflation, but councils are not allowed to keep the increase to



Photo: Andrew Wiard

9 January: Camden council house tenants & trades unionists celebrate their 77% ballot vote victory against Camden Council's proposed ALMO

a large carrot and
...
using

spend on improvements. The backlog of repairs has reached £19 billion — the result of a calculating policy of under-investment. Getting a fraction of this money back in exchange for private management is a derisory deal by any standards.

Not only did the tenants see through privatisation in its various guises — not only did they oppose it — more significantly, they came up with a plan of their own. A very simple and effective plan: cut out the middle man, the capitalist, and give the money direct to council housing. They pointed to the inefficiency of private schemes. In neighbouring Westminster an Almo has already run out of cash.

Estates are being sold to once-affordable housing associations, which are themselves a prime example of privatised housing stock (legislative changes in the '80s severed their relationship to local authorities, resulting in reduced democratic participation, spiralling rents, and a reluctance to meet maintenance obligations). Leaseholders faced with high estimates for capital works could usually negotiate a reduction with the council, but fear losing such consideration under a private organisation.

Battle

The battle for direct funding will be stepped up in the coming months, with public meetings, parliamentary lobbying and other activities. In rejecting the Almo, residents have struck a blow in support of a great social asset unique to Britain and one of the finer achievements fought for in the Second World War. For a Labour government to abandon the concept of affordable public housing at a time of housing crisis equal to the 1940s is, as Labour MP Austin Mitchell said, “a sad betrayal”.

But no one should be surprised. Until “public ownership” translates into real working class control and managers are prevented from building careers out of the sell-off of workers’ assets, we can expect more of the same, whatever government gets into power.

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.

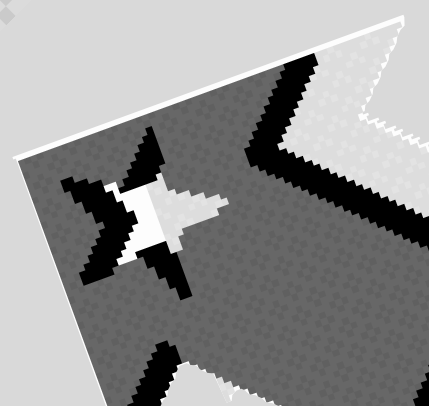
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Back to Front – Against the law

‘The British mixture of the law of statute and common law has become a barrier to the EU legislative onslaught...’

THE MOVES to introduce a new EU constitution are being worked in tandem with the proposed domestic changes that Blair is trying to push through the British legal system.

It is not coincidence that Blair tries to play on negative populism by depicting the judiciary as men in tights sitting on a woosack at the same time as the EU press for primacy over the laws of member states.

The British mixture of the law of statute and common law has become a barrier to the EU legislative onslaught. In particular Blair sees common law, with its basis of evolving legal precedent through the courts via plaintiff and defendant, as being far too independent.

The history and development of common law i.e. equity, tort, contract and trust are unique to Britain and throughout they have acted as a dynamic. This is in contrast to other countries that have placed greater emphasis on statute law via parliamentary legislature.

The evolution of common law over the centuries has rested on the principle of the separation of powers as advocated by among others Edmund Burke in the 18th century. This separation means that powers are streamed between parliament,

government and the judiciary, with the monarchy seen as a figurehead. The theory behind the separation of powers is that tyranny is avoided because power is not concentrated in one single body, i.e. the Divine Right of Kings would never again be on the agenda.

All of this is anathema to corporatist Blair, hence his desire to scrap the position of Lord Chancellor and the Law Lords who constitute the highest Court of Appeal bound by precedent, along with the Queen’s Councillors (QCs).

But the corporatist is becoming bogged down in his attack on independence. The position of Lord Chancellor as recently taken by the compliant Falconer was intended to be scrapped earlier this year. Falconer was to declare the position closed and himself redundant. However, it was found that such power is not vested with the Lord Chancellor and any attempts by him to scrap the position would have been deemed ultra vires. The attackers now have to re-group.

Our country and its constitution are under threat. Rather than be distracted by Blair’s mock concern about elitism, in this case the judiciary, we should see his attacks for what they are – the acts of a quisling.

FINANCIAL APPEAL: June 2004 is the 10th anniversary of the death of Reg Birch, founding Chairman of the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist). In commemoration of Reg’s life, the first political life of this engineer and communist is to be published.

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