

WORKERS

www.workers.org.uk

JUNE 2012 £1



ACADEMIES: THE FRANCHISING OF OUR SCHOOLS



Pensions The truth behind the 'deficits' | 06



UCU Defeat the lies, fight for quality | 08



Marxist Thinking Working class governance | 15

WORKERS

“ It’s disdain, not apathy

TO SAY Labour was the winner in the May local elections is to take all the power and fun out of the word “winning”. With slumping turnouts around the country, the best that can be said is that Labour did the least worst of the parties standing. Two-thirds of voters ignored the exercise.

That’s not just because Labour’s policies, where it has them, are often so close to those of the Liberals or the Conservatives. It’s because the people of Britain have twigged that local democracy is fast becoming a thing of myth and legend: all the important decisions are being taken by central government – or by the private companies that have been given lucrative contracts to run services.

Those who did turn out offered one spectacular rebuff to Cameron: overwhelmingly, they rejected the idea of directly elected mayors. It’s not hard to see why, since the concept leads to one more highly paid local dictator and even less point in electing a local councillor.

People have had enough of freeloading politicians. Ten cities held referendums on 3 May on whether to replace local council cabinets with directly elected mayors, while Doncaster voted on whether to keep its elected mayor. Nine cities resoundingly said No.

Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, Wakefield, Coventry, Leeds and Bradford all voted No, with Bristol voting Yes and Doncaster opting to keep its mayor. Bradford said No (on a 35 per cent turnout) even though the self-admiring new MP George Galloway pronounced himself in favour of the idea. Bristol, meanwhile, saw a turnout of just 24 per cent, less than one in four. In one ward, Filwood, just 9.9 per cent voted. One voting station in Cabot ward recorded just 6 per cent turnout. Bourgeois democracy in action.

Commentators are quick to dismiss low turnouts as signs of voter “apathy” (as if anyone but the candidates could get truly enthusiastic about it all). But one result shows that this is probably not the case: Thurrock. Yes, this Essex town managed just 27.15 per cent turnout across the 17 wards involved in the local elections – down from 35 per cent last year, and lower than the lowest ward turnout of 2011. Yet in April 30.4 per cent had turned out when the People’s Pledge campaign organised a (completely unofficial) referendum in Thurrock on whether there should be a national vote on staying in or leaving the EU.

So people do care about politics, just not about bourgeois politicians. And the last thing we want is more of them. ■

Cover photo Andrew Wiard/www.andrew-wiard.info



WORKERS is published by the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist)
78 Seymour Avenue, London N17 9EB.
ISSN 0266-8580

www.workers.org.uk
Issue 159, June 2012

”

Contents – June 2012

News

In London in the Olympics? Then walk! p3; University and College Union: executive stress, p4; Unite mulls EU motions, p5; Greece, Germany, and the election, p6

03

Features

The truth behind the pension fund “deficits”, p6; UCU: Defeat the lies, fight for quality, p8; McAdemies: franchising state schools, p9; Ireland’s choice: bow down before the European Union, or declare that enough’s enough, p12

06

Historic Notes

1861 to 1865: British workers and the American Civil War, p14

14



OLYMPICS	Forget about transport
BATTERSEA	Buyers line up
UCU	Executive stress
TUITION FEES	Pushing up public debt
EU	Unite mulls motions
AFGHANISTAN	Costs out of control
PRIVATISATION	Nuclear contract
NEWS ANALYSIS	Greece and Germany
EUROBRIEFS	The latest from Brussels
WHAT'S ON	Coming soon

In London in the Olympics? Then walk!

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON has all but given up the ghost over transport delivery in London during the Olympics: they have now resorted to issuing leaflets at critical London railway stations such as Charing Cross, advising people to walk to work during the Olympics. The quality of public transport is being pushed back 2000 years to Greek Olympic days – use shank’s pony!

In another rushed move, after only nine hours of Commons and House of Lords debate, the Coalition rammed through emergency legislation to suspend Sunday working legislation for the eight Sundays over the Olympics. The convention is that MPs and Lords have a free vote over matters affecting Sunday working. These measures followed a three-line Coalition whip to lift protection and rights at work for thousands of shop staff.

USDAW, the shop workers union, surveyed 20,000 members and found 78 per cent opposed to the suspension of Sunday working legislation. Half (51 per cent) were already under pressure from employers to work Sundays, and 73 per cent felt

they were being pressurised to work Sundays if opening hours were extended. And the last public opinion poll on Sunday working and extending shop hours in 2010 found 89 per cent of the public opposed to extending Sunday working.

Meanwhile, South London residents have received an apology from the Ministry of Defence over screaming jets, low flying helicopters, attack boats on the Thames and similar silliness associated with the early May London-wide week-long “anti-terrorism” exercises associated with the Games. Calls for public meetings and enquiries into the siting of ground-to-air missiles in east and southeast London are being ignored.

G4S, previously known as Securicor, the world’s second-largest provider of security, mercenaries and privatised police services, pocketed £30 million in profit for the first quarter of 2012 just for security at empty venues for the Olympics. They will clear £200 million for security during the eight weeks of the Olympics and Paralympics. ■



CPBML/Workers Public Meeting, London Thursday 14 June, 7.30 pm “Olympics: a city hijacked”

Bertrand Russell Room, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Nearest tube Holborn.

It was supposed to regenerate east London. But the building jobs went to migrant labour, costs rocketed, landlords in search of an Olympics bonanza are evicting long-standing tenants – and now they’re talking about missiles. What’s happened to London’s Olympic dream? Everybody welcome.

EUROBRIEFS

The latest from Brussels

Fourth Reich

PANOS KAMMENOS, leader of the Independent Greeks party, said, "The German government is trying, through economic policy, to conquer Europe ... The Germans are trying to force submission on the rest of Europe and create a fourth economic Reich." Germany insists that growth can only come from austerity (that is, from destroying growth). German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble said recently, "The first precondition in order to have sustainable growth everywhere in Europe is fiscal consolidation."

Backing for German militarism

BRITISH DEFENCE Secretary Philip Hammond wants to see the German army re-arm and march round the world. Speaking in Berlin on 2 May, he said a military transformation will rely, "in Germany in particular, on the ability to generate the political will and public support for the deployment of military resources more widely in the future in support of [NATO] operations beyond our borders."

He went on: "By re-focussing existing budgetary resources on more deployable capabilities, Germany has probably a greater capacity than any other European NATO partner to contribute to short-term enhancement of the Alliance's capabilities."

"It is in all our interests to encourage Germany to realise that potential."

Fascists on screen

THE GREEK Nazi party – Golden Dawn – got just 7 per cent of the votes. Yet the BBC in its News on 8 May chose to let its leader speak to camera. But it did not do so for any of the leaders of anti-austerity parties. Similarly, after the French election, the BBC interviewed no member of the winning Socialist Party but it did find time to talk to a National Front MEP.

Britain to agree EU bailout fund basis

THE GOVERNMENT wants to pass a Bill which would see Britain ratify an EU treaty change, agreed in March 2011, to give the eurozone bailout fund a legal base. This would have the effect of tightening the euro's grip on member countries. ■



GMB members at threatened Remploy factories led London's annual May Day march as it made its way from Clerkenwell Green to Trafalgar Square.

Photo: Workers

UCU: executive stress

UCU, the University and College Union, has an NEC of 72 and 119,401 members. In contrast, the National Union of Teachers has an NEC of 40 for 295,000 members. PCS, Unite and Unison all have proportionally fewer NEC members.

As reported in May's issue of WORKERS, the University and College Union ballot returned an 88.6 per cent vote to cut the size of the union's National Executive Committee. 85.1 per cent voted to be balloted when UCU negotiators believed a final offer was on the table. 82.4 per cent voted to elect lay national negotiators by one member one vote. The political faction UCU Left had called on members to vote against all three.

An open letter from some branch officers, some of whom are members of UCU Left, said that the second proposal meant that "any and all offers that are so described by the employers or the Government as 'final' offers will be put out to ballot." This was a direct misrepresentation, since the question on the ballot paper said that members would be balloted "whenever the majority of UCU negotiators believe a final offer is on the table".

Ever more one-day strikes, with ever-smaller numbers, won't do, unless we are trying to teach our members that strikes don't work.

Of course the argument has been won: our members know how bad the pensions "reforms" are for them. But they can also see that repeated one-day strikes will not gain us anything. We need a long-term strategy, of reclaiming control over our workplaces, in particular, by asserting control over the hours we work. For instance, let's reclaim our lunch hours.

We could work to rule, including working to contract by refusing to work extra unpaid hours, withdraw cooperation to implement projects, and adhere strictly to health and safety rules. We need to improve wages, hours and conditions. We need to rebuild our trade unions, starting by organising in our workplaces. ■

BATTERSEA

Buyers line up

FOLLOWING the WORKERS article in April exposing the speculation and parasitic capitalism associated with the old Battersea power station site in London, there are reports of yet further "new" development.

The original £1.5 million purchase of

the site in 1983 has blossomed into a £500 million price tag in 2012 – a price escalator of around £16.5 million a year during the past 30 years of standing derelict – and at least 10 interested buyers.

Wading in with a £1 billion redevelopment proposal is Chelsea Football Club, toy of the Russian multi-millionaire Roman Abramovich, the 68th richest man in the world. ■

TUITION FEES

Pushing up public debt

A REPORT by Andrew McGettigan, for the Intergenerational Foundation, calculates that the government scheme to allow universities to charge £9,000 tuition fees could push public sector debt up by £100 billion over the next 20 years. The government itself forecasts that student loan debt will peak at £50 billion in 2030.

The study warns, "the cost of government borrowing adds significantly to the national debt in the short and medium term." Students at England's universities will be able to take out government-backed loans covering the higher fees, as teaching grants are slashed from 2012.

The Office for Budget Responsibility

estimates the loans will cost £12 billion a year by 2015-16. This is an increase of £5 to £6 billion a year and "eclipses" the £3 billion saved by the cuts to the teaching grant. So the policy of higher student loans costs twice what is saved by cutting the grant. The report also claims that the government is 'secretly investigating' selling off student loan liabilities.

General Secretary of the University and College Union Sally Hunt said the report confirmed that the government's punitive cuts had nothing to do with reducing the national debt and everything to do with shifting the funding of higher education from the state to the individual. She said, "Instead of being guided by ideology and adding billions to the national debt ministers should follow the example of other countries and invest in higher education." ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

June

Thursday 14 June, 7.30pm. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

"Olympics: a city hijacked"

Is this what they meant by regeneration? Come and discuss what the Games really mean for London. Everybody welcome.

PRIVATISATION

Nuclear contract

SERCO, ONE of the largest outsourcing companies in the world, has announced it has been awarded the maintenance contract for Britain's nuclear warheads, worth over £1.5 billion. It has "won" public sector contracts worth £2.9 billion since January and expects another £1 billion to be announced shortly.

If the continued privatisation of Britain's nuclear deterrent makes you nervous, consider Serco's other interests. It manages the Atomic Weapons Establishment along with Lockheed Martin and Jacobs. This is the most advanced research, design and production centre in the world.

Serco also manages the fleet of over 100 ships that enables the Royal Navy to access naval bases in Britain – Faslane, Portsmouth and Devonport. It supplies tugs, pilots, stores, fuel, munitions and passenger services to the Royal Navy. It also provides facilities and information systems to the Science and Technology Laboratory, the Ministry of Defence's research centre, and has a £400 million contract to rationalise the Laboratory's estate – selling it off in other words. And who manages Britain's military presence in Gibraltar? Serco.

Provision of engineering and maintenance to the Fleet Air Arm and Royal Air Force and logistical support to Royal Air Force bases are all run by Serco. Military satellite communication, RAF Fylingdales, the US base at Menwith Hill – again Serco.

The company also trains helicopter pilots, advises on safety for the Royal Navy's nuclear submarines, and even manages the Cabinet Office's Emergency Planning College, the government training centre for crisis management and emergency planning.

Surprised at the extent of privatised influence in Britain's defences? In fact, the British state has used privateers for hundreds of years from Elizabeth I's era, with private companies occupying Africa and India. ■

Unite mulls EU motions

MOTIONS TO THE Unite national conference in Brighton in June epitomise the divide in the union over the European Union and Britain remaining a member. Four motions clearly call for Britain's withdrawal – CYWU & NFP, London and Eastern Region, London United Craft Branch, SE/Weybridge Branch and Long Eaton. Wigan is calling for a referendum.

Only Southampton 0854 Branch calls for retention of membership and, worse, greater integration of Britain into Europe. Its motion reads as a textbook model motion drafted by the fifth column in the unions once spearheaded by certain characters in the TUC or even past general secretaries of MSF one of Unite's predecessor unions.

The threadbare so-called social and economic rights bestowed by the EU cannot hide the draconian anti-strike, anti-union, anti-worker Thatcherite legislation of the EU. Unions need to recognise the devastating destruction of Britain's manufacturing and industrial base, which should be the heartlands of Unite, by successive EU treaties..

It is in the interests of the British working class that we remove our country from this capitalist alliance of destruction and rebuild Britain. Unite has the opportunity to take a lead and vigorously campaign for a referendum on the EU. And if so, best keep it simple: the question on the ballot should read, "Should Britain leave the EU – Yes or No." ■

AFGHANISTAN

Costs out of control

THE FULL withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan, scheduled for 2014, has been overshadowed by the US proposal to subsidise the Afghan army and police. The USA intends to support the Afghan army and police for at least the next ten years.

The military costs at present are £4.3 billion a year, which surpasses the rest of the entire Afghan budget of £3.1 billion. The US is looking to its NATO allies to provide financial support, and in Britain's case a figure of £620 million for the next decade.

A House of Commons research paper analysing the costs of the war estimates that it has cost £62 million for each individual Taliban (Afghan) fighter, which it describes

as an "expensive waste of equipment and manpower".

This is the fourth major intervention by Britain in Afghan affairs in the last 160 years. All have ended in disastrous loss of life and pointless destruction if not outright defeat. G.R.Greig, a British military chaplain writing about the First Afghan War of 1839-1842 described it as "a war begun for no wise purpose...brought to a close after suffering and disaster. Not one benefit, political or military, was acquired with this war. Our eventual evacuation of the country resembled the retreat of an army defeated."

Not another penny should be spent in Afghanistan, not another day should pass with the British military (or any foreign national) being on Afghan territory. No intervention in the sovereign affairs of Afghanistan. Getting the troops out now should be the order of the day. ■

NEWS ANALYSIS

Greece, Germany, and the election

IN THE GREEK election centre right New Democracy and former coalition partner Pasok (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) were decisively rejected along with their EU-dictated bail out. Their votes collapsed from 33.5 per cent to about 19 per cent and from 43 per cent to about 13 per cent, respectively. Syriza (Greek for “from the roots”, itself a coalition of groups opposed to the deal) came a close second with about 17 per cent. Their leader Alexis Tsipras, while not yet explicitly advocating a Greek exit from the euro, rejected the deal, describing it as “barbaric” and in particular called for the repeal of laws cutting wages and pensions and abolishing collective bargaining rights. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) with about 8.5 per cent of the vote had unequivocally called for leaving the European Union and the Euro and for the writing off of all Greece’s debt.

The extreme right wing Golden Dawn, mainly campaigning on an anti immigration ticket, got about 7 per cent. Even before the current crisis many Greek workers, especially in the construction sector, had lost their jobs to low-paid immigrant labour.

The elections followed months of strikes and demonstrations against an unprecedented assault on living conditions, workers’ rights, pensions and public services in line with principles set out in the Lisbon Treaty. Following the election results German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that the austerity measures were “not negotiable”.



Anti-bail out demonstration in Heraklion, Crete.

German capitalists have profited from a similar savage attack on German workers in 2005 under the banner “Agenda 2010”. In 2005 the SPD/Greens coalition imposed the largest cut in the German social security system since the war with drastic reductions in pensions and unemployment benefits. There were mass demonstrations and strikes against “political” issues being banned by the German constitution. Chancellor Merkel seems to think Greek workers need a dose of the same medicine, though the Greek economy is completely different and hampered by its association with Germany through the euro.

According to government statistics the number of Germans living below the poverty line has increased to 18 per cent and one out of every six children is officially classified as “poor”, one third of children being poor in big cities such as Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen. But the country’s capitalists have built the industrial powerhouse of Europe, sweeping aside nascent and smaller industries in such countries as Greece and Spain.

New elections in Greece are being planned for June after none of the three leading parties was able to put together a coalition. Latest opinion polls show increasing support for Syriza with a good chance it will be able to form the next government. Yet clarity about the euro still seems to elude the Greeks, with about 75 per cent of them wanting to keep the currency that has ruined their economy. ■

The combination of quantitative easing and the supposed pension fund deficit

The truth behind the

IN ITS ATTACK on pensions the government has employed shock and awe tactics – inflating pension fund deficits and claiming these to be based on workers’ longevity. In fact the chief reason for pension deficits has not been longevity but the use of false accountancy standards that were first introduced under Labour in 2000 and since continued by the Coalition. In their struggle to protect pensions, it has been the organised working class who have recognised what has been happening and trade unions have begun to dissect the legitimacy of government claims.

To their shame many professional bodies involved with occupational pensions had until recently gone along with the government’s nonsense that pension deficits had been caused through us living longer. But, as with most things, once the “rock begins to roll” those who were previously timid start to join in. For example since November last year the National Association of Pension Funds has been pointing out that the latest round of quantitative easing and the pension funds’ method of deficit accounting (which values assets on short-term market prices rather than taking a longer view, and has led to the closure of perfectly viable funds) “is a recipe that is destroying the value of Britain’s retirement savings. It is a torture for pension funds because it artificially suppresses long term interest rates”.

Even the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is finding that its covert support of inflating deficits to facilitate the closure of final salary pension schemes has an unwelcome twist. Its member companies are still faced with trying to shore up artificial deficits by having to invest new sums of money into closed final salary funds. A CBI spokesman recently said, “Money which company sponsors might have spent on job creation is instead diverted into filling the deficits. It’s a vicious cycle.”

Undervalued

The fact is that if a more realistic set of financial assumptions were used, our pension funds would be shown to be something like 30 per cent to 40 per cent currently undervalued as a result of having to apply the government’s prescribed accountancy basis. Therefore those pension schemes that have been closed need not have done so. Perhaps this could be something that the social democrats and their paid talking heads in the media could take up when they witter on about the cost of us living longer, “pensions apartheid” and the need for economic growth.

A good example of where things can begin to be addressed is the fact that we currently have over 800,000 people toiling at work beyond age 65, while over a million young people between the ages 18 to 23 are unemployed. Clearly there is a need here for intergenerational planning to match the requirements of young and old, so that both

ve easing and government accountancy rules is forcing up
ts, closing schemes that are in fact perfectly viable...

the pension fund 'deficits'



Photo: Workers

Health visitors on the picket line at Whipps Cross Hospital, northeast London, during the 10 May strike against changes to pensions.

are satisfied during the transition between work and retirement. Yet the only thing on offer from the Coalition is to extend state retirement age to 68 and beyond.

In October 2010 *WORKERS* reported that pension liabilities had leapt by £10 billion in one month and in 2012 it is no different. The wild swings in the government's deficit accountancy measure have been such that the total pensions deficit rose by £10.6 billion in a fortnight during April. How are organisations able to fund pension schemes and plan their annual budgets when faced with this type of accountancy nonsense that has absolutely nothing to do with longevity?

The complete disassembling of the government's pension position also enables other areas of political economy to be examined. Previously *WORKERS* has warned that the government plans to create through "regulatory prudence" a captive savings market in Britain that will be forced

"The attack on workers is orchestrated by the British government hiding behind EU legislation..."

to invest in "risk free" government debt (gilt-edged securities, or "gilts").

This regulatory approach is a classic example of where the attack on workers is orchestrated by the British government hiding behind EU legislation and directives. Concealed behind the noise of deficits is the European Insurance & Occupational Pensions Authority (EIOPA), which is based in Frankfurt. On behalf of the EU and the Westminster Parliament it is EIOPA's dead hand that prescribes the basis on which our pension liabilities should be measured.

Germany has few pre-funded

occupational pension schemes and what schemes there are only represent 16 per cent of its GDP, while Britain has accumulated pension funds worth 85 per cent of our GDP. So why from its EU bunker in Frankfurt does EIOPA dictate how we must measure our pension liabilities, while prescribing how our pension assets should be invested so as to cover useless government debt – that will result in our pension funds incurring a massive capital loss?

The question of pensions runs deep into the political economy of Britain, and the struggle will unfold in a number of ways. Cameron's recent announcement that he will now make a stand on EU financial diktat (Solvency II) should be watched closely because as a euro team player any stand by him will be about as useful as a chocolate fireplace. Increasingly it is urgent to formulate what we need as British workers and put this in place alongside Britain's withdrawal from the EU. ■

The annual congress of the University and College Union in Manchester meets at a crucial time for further and higher education in Britain...

UCU: defeat the lies, fight for quality

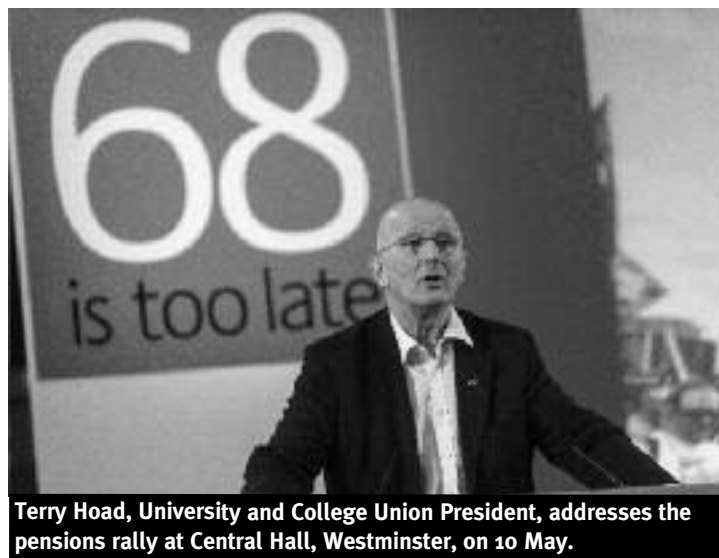
WHEN TEACHERS and lecturers meet at the University and College Union Congress in Manchester in early June they face three major challenges: a government determined not to fund education; employers determined to compete against each other rather than act collaboratively against that government onslaught; and tensions within the union itself following recent changes to the National Executive Committee (NEC).

The UCU is currently the only organisation with a coherent policy for post-school education for the whole of the country, so the future of the union has a significant bearing on the future of the country.

Frightened of the public reaction but quoting “coalition harmony” as the reason, the much-trumpeted government plan for a higher education bill giving private firms more access to the university sector was not in the recent Queen’s Speech. Yet private companies continue to gain footholds without legislation, seen in news that a US multimedia company is making a bid to take over distance learning at the University of Leicester.

The abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance in colleges, tripling of university fees from this September (see news item, page 5) and the numbers cap on home students, all achieved without new legislation, are already having a significant impact. It is already known that the “cap” on home students was breached by 25,000 this year as applicants rushed to avoid the fees hike. The government is now handing down the fines for that “over recruitment”, with London Met alone facing a £6 million fine. Existing private providers are not subject to the cap and are allowed unlimited recruitment of taxpayer-backed students on courses specifically designated by business secretary Vince Cable.

When fees were introduced the country was told two enormous lies. One was that



Terry Hoad, University and College Union President, addresses the pensions rally at Central Hall, Westminster, on 10 May.

it would lead to an improved education for students and the second that this would improve public finances. Neither could be further from the truth.

A recent report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) has highlighted how few contact hours students have with their teachers and that in many prestigious universities that contact time is with teaching assistants such as doctoral students rather than with qualified teachers. So no promised improvement, rather a growth in student dissatisfaction. Likewise, the suggestion that a rise in student fees would help public debt has now been shown to be the exact opposite.

Employer attack

A recent announcement allowing universities to recruit uncapped numbers at the lower A-Level grade threshold of ABB (previously AAB) will in effect mean some universities will no longer be subject to the cap. It will largely affect, to their advantage, recruitment to the Russell Group universities. These are the institutions which have the highest rated research according to a controversial “Research Excellence Framework” known as ‘the REF’ to which all universities are subjected (a sort of Ofsted inspection except the main focus is universities’ research rather than teaching).

Competition for university places is highest at the Russell Group universities. Lowering the entry requirements in a way that will affect just this relatively small number of more financially secure universities – i.e., a “cap some but not others” policy – is a perfect recipe for competition among institutions and financial instability across the sector. It is also another block to those students wishing to move from FE to HE with their access qualifications because the universities which recruit them, that is, not Russell Group universities, will continue to have their numbers capped.

This “divide and rule” employers’ response to the lowest level of public funding for higher education in Europe is now compounding the damage done by government. Another maladaptive response is the massive increase in overseas recruitment by British universities. It is the norm for at least 15 per cent of university students to come from outside the country, but for many institutions it is a much higher percentage. The sector as a whole is now relying on a third of its income from overseas fees – a recipe for instability.

Union responsibilities

The recent ballot result whereby the union decided to reduce the size of the National Executive Committee was a good decision as the NEC has been too big (see news item in this issue). What matters now is how the money saved is spent and whether the new NEC can offer leadership to members dealing with the rising attack on the FE and HE sectors.

Some delegates will want to use conference time to revisit that decision but members will not forgive that indulgence. Government plans for the sector are demonstrably increasing public debt and stifling the education and research that could rebuild the country. Every member has a huge job to expose the lies and ensure the quality of education. ■

This government has both an ideological and a commercial commitment to privatisation of public services in Britain...

McAdemies: franchising state schools



Photo: Andrew Wiard/www.andrew-wiard.info

Protest march in January against attempts by Education Secretary Michael Gove to force four primary schools in Haringey, London – Downhills, Noel Park, Coleraine Park and Nightingale – to convert to academy status.

BACK IN SEPTEMBER 2011, in Norwich, Prime Minister Cameron spoke of “changing the structure of education, allowing new providers in to start schools – providing more choice, more competition and giving schools greater independence”.

He went on to elaborate who these new providers might be. “We’ve said to charities, to faith groups, to businesses, to community organisations, teachers: ‘Come in and set up a great new school, in the state sector’.”

A few days earlier, Education Secretary Michael Gove had said in response to questions on the BBC, “We don’t need to have profits AT THE MOMENT” [our emphasis].

In other words, the necessary change in the law to allow profit-taking from state

schools has not been ruled out – and given the government’s pressure to set up more and more academy trusts and so-called “Free Schools”, the likelihood is that such change is already planned.

Denis MacShane and David Ward, both MPs in Yorkshire, have repeatedly asked questions on the funding of new free schools in their Rotherham and Bradford constituencies. Their questions on funding, demand for the schools, pupil numbers, start-up costs and so forth, remain unanswered on the spurious ground of “commercial confidentiality”. Since when has the funding of state schools ever been subject to “commercial” considerations? (Maintained school budgets are always published annually.)

This government has both an

ideological and a commercial commitment to privatisation of public services in Britain.

Gove has often stated his support for the charter schools in the USA and the “free schools” in Sweden, both the product of free market, anti-state provision governments heavily influenced by Chicago School privateers and Wall Street vultures. This type of organisation seems to be the model to which he’s working, particularly with free schools and the “forced” academies where it is claimed a school is underperforming.

The net effect of this twin movement is to diminish local authorities so that any council control of schools ceases or just

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

covers a rump of school provision. In turn, this means that people in the locality of a school lose any semblance of control over what that school does, and any effective means of holding the school accountable for the provision it offers.

The head of the Association of Directors of Children Services recently asked for public clarification from the government as to where responsibility lies for holding academies (no longer technically schools) and free schools to account. No public response.

The experience of academy trusts, free schools in Sweden and US charter schools has been mixed. Some adhere to local and national curriculum requirements; some diverge. Some stick to national staffing provision, conditions and pay; others don't.

“It’s a big market by anyone’s standards, especially as once you’re in it, there’s a guaranteed funding stream and no competition.”

Some adhere to admissions procedures; some try to ring fence their admissions. In terms of quality, studies in the USA show that charter schools do not generally make the improvements claimed for them when tested against the same measures established for school board/state schools.

Susanne Wiborg's* excellent paper on

the Swedish experience cites evidence from studies that show a similar pattern after 17 years of “free schools”.

Gove and his government hold up academies as a shining light of progress. But the evidence is not unequivocal.

Some of the original academies have certainly achieved better outcomes than the schools they replaced. But that is not universally true and in many areas the improvements made by other local schools have been equally impressive. Indeed, much of the progress claimed for academies does not stand up to scrutiny according to the government's preferred measures. For example, in 2010, half the 5 GCSEs (A–C grades) claimed by academies were “equivalent” qualifications such as GNVQs – the percentage of such qualifications for other schools was 25 per cent.

So why this break up of state schooling

Babcock and Wilcox: the slide from manufacture to ‘services’

EARLIER THIS YEAR, parents, children and teachers woke to the news that Devon County Council was transferring responsibility for education provision to Babcock International. In the rapidly changing landscape which is education in this country, such a seismic event barely causes a ripple beyond the boundaries of Devon, so accustomed have we become to schools being treated as a saleable, and therefore disposable asset.

Previous such experiences teach us that, in all likelihood, not a great deal will appear to change. The same advisors will advise, the same heads will run schools, and the same teachers will teach in them. What has changed fundamentally, of course, is that public money devolved to the council to manage education now gets pocketed by Babcock. A total of £125 million in a seven-year contract. A nice little earner.

The pattern which has developed elsewhere in the country does not bode well for Devon. The usual scenario runs as follows. Private company takes over education services in an area, with

extravagant claims about transforming outcomes for students. For a few years they will ply their trade, but standards will stubbornly refuse to rise in line with initial trumpeting. Eventually they will pack their bags and withdraw to try their luck elsewhere, leaving the council to pick up the pieces.

Guinea pigs

For nursery-age children in Devon today, this experiment will run until they are no more than halfway through their educational lives and then...what? Another experiment?

And just what is the trade that these companies actually ply? What will Babcock do?

Its history makes curious reading. In the second half of the 19th century, George Babcock and Steven Wilcox established a company in America to manufacture their revolutionary “non-explosive boiler”. In 1881 they opened an office in Glasgow and expanded rapidly, trading worldwide.

Over the course of the 20th century,

Babcock and Wilcox grew and prospered. War proved no setback as its factories could readily adapt to manufacture tanks and munitions, alongside the marine boilers already in great demand. By 1960 it was diversifying into the nuclear energy industry, but still in a manufacturing capacity.

Tellingly, it was in 1979 that Babcock and Wilcox became Babcock International Group. As Thatcher unleashed her war on industry, Babcock began to develop other, non-manufacturing strings to its bow. Its focus became not simply engineering but the “support services business”, a world that did not exist when Messrs' Wilcox and Babcock first picked up a spanner.

So it was government policy 30 years ago that prompted Babcock to dilute its core business of making things and enter the world of selling management. Now, today's government policy unlocks the realm of public service and hands it to Babcock on a plate.

We need educationalists to manage education, and, more importantly, we need boilermakers to make boilers. ■

if it's not about quality, as claimed?

At the beginning of April 2012, Cameron repeated his assertions about providing "more choice". as a "child of Thatcher" would be expected to. But the Swedish free schools have been shown by Wiborg and others to have limited choice for many, by increasing the segregation of students where integrated schools were previously the norm.

Most Swedish free schools continue to follow a curriculum similar to that of maintained state schools. The exceptions tend to be where the proposers/owners have a curriculum or method or "platform" that they wish to market. Or where they are "faith-based".

Additionally, after nearly two decades, the number of providers of Swedish state-funded free schools has fallen significantly. Monopoly rules apply, with there now being five large providers, some smaller groups and relatively few left in the control of the original proposers, i.e. parents, teachers etc. The number of free schools funded by the state has risen to 700, but the three largest for-profit companies running free schools now have a quarter of all free school students in their institutions.

And profits are plentiful from these state handouts. In most of these schools profits ranged from 8 per cent of turnover to a magnificent 50 per cent.

Follow the money

And that's what this is all about. Ideology, certainly; profits, most certainly. As Lester says in the fictional crime series *THE WIRE* when talking about municipal corruption, "Follow the money, Jimmy, follow the money."

Charter schools, too, have shown a similar pattern in the USA. There have been dodgy statistics to try and justify their impact on pupil progress, demystified in 2009 and 2010. Companies have collapsed, leaving children and neighbourhoods without schools and school boards without school places as they have lost the premises to (now bankrupt) companies. Some school boards such as Philadelphia's, have taken back charter schools because of their abject inability to

deliver their promises and boasts.

Some charter school providers have been ditched by investors because they have failed to make the profits envisioned. Talking of one prominent education company also involved in British schooling, a Wall Street guru blamed the collapse of the share price on the company's willingness to form partnerships with state school boards rather than set up "cheap to run" schools of its own. As with the stripping of the New Orleans state school system after Hurricane Katrina, where the replacement charter schools immediately sacked over 4,500 teachers so they could introduce lower wages and conditions, this is what these asset strippers want.

What is the attraction in England? Education here has been involving private companies for well over a decade. Capita, Edison, Cambridge Education, Serco and others have been involved in running or partnering local education authorities in the past 12 years. Whole swathes of government initiatives and schemes have been managed by private contractors.

Ofsted, arguably one of the most powerful organisations ever established to enforce compliance to government will in this country, has always relied on private contractors. Originally, there were about 150. Now, there are three core providers for the whole country.

There is big money involved. In 2009, contractors in education support services and running Labour's education strategies were involved in a market worth £2 billion. Yet even this is small compared with the total annual spend on state education in England and Wales. Revenue expenditure on schools will stand at about £50 billion this year. Total expenditure is likely to stay just below £90 billion. It's a big market by anyone's standards, especially as once you're in it, there's a guaranteed funding stream and no competition.

Sweden is a much smaller "market" but is still proving popular with companies run for profit. The John Bauer organisation made 120 million Swedish Kronor profit in 2006. In 2008 it was sold on to the Danish company Axcel, a venture capital company that had previously specialised in home



A pupil at Downhills school makes his point. NUT teachers at Downhills went on strike against forced academy status on 22 May.

Photo: Andrew Wiard/www.andrew-wiard.info

styling products and dog food. Kunskapskolan runs its schools on a McDonald's-style franchising basis. This company, the sixth-largest free school provider in Sweden, has plans to operate academies in London and Suffolk.

Gove's reforms, if taken to fruition, would have a fundamental effect on the quality of education for our children, on conditions in schools, on pay and on our ability as a nation to plan for the future as the cash pours into private pockets.

Anders Hutlin, CEO of Global Management Education Systems, a company based in the United Arab Emirates, was quoted in 2010 as saying, "It [English education] can't just be handed over to amateurs. We are exploring opportunities right now, supporting groups of parents. That's a natural starting point."

Do we really want our schools to be run by these people? ■

*Wiborg, S (2010) *Swedish Free Schools: Do they work?* published by the Centre for Learning and Life Changes in Knowledge Economies and Societies. See <http://www.llakes.org>

The Irish government was elected in February 2011 on a wave of popular discontent with the way in which the Irish economy was being managed in favour of banks. Now it now wishes to pass into law a treaty which would actually allow a body outside accountable to the Irish people, to control all Irish revenue and expenditure.

Ireland's choice: bow down before the European Union

ON 31 MAY Ireland, alone among its European partners, goes to the polls in a referendum on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) Treaty and the Fiscal Compact Treaty. These treaties are the latest EU attempt to shore up the euro following the collapse of the Greek and Irish economies, providing a means to bail out any other EU state in trouble while tightening EU control over the economy of member states.

The treaties were, of course, designed in such a way as to avoid the use of the term treaty, thus avoiding the troublesome and messy business of putting them to the people of Europe in a series of referenda. In this respect the Irish government, a Fine Gael/Irish Labour Party coalition, was no different from the other EU governments and had hoped to avoid a referendum as well, but in the end had to bow to the overwhelming desire of the Irish people to have their say and to the advice of their own Attorney General.

Failed banks

It is easy to understand why it adopted this position. Having already been clobbered by the EU in order to bail out their own failed banks, it saw two treaties set up to clobber Ireland again – this time to bail out the failed banks of Italy, Spain or any other EU nation that falls victim to their greed and incompetence. Needless to say the government and all the main opposition parties are campaigning relentlessly for a Yes vote.

If they were to succeed in this then they will be handing over to the EU what little remains of an Irish sovereignty that has been steadily eroding since Ireland's accession to the EU in 1973. The impacts of the ESM are quite staggering for Ireland. It will have the power to call on Ireland to make a contribution to the Agency (not even the EU itself) of up to 11 billion euros – a sum equivalent to one third of all Irish government tax revenues in 2011. This vast

This article is an edited version of a speech delivered by a visiting Irish comrade at the CPBML May Day Meeting at Conway Hall in London.



Dublin: protest outside Dail at the end of 2010 against the IMF-imposed budget. The government was swept away two months later, but the new one is now trying to hand all power to the European Union.

Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

amount can be raised by the ESM at its sole discretion at any time in the future.

There is no limit on the sums that can be sought from members of the ESM. And as if this were not enough it has also been given wide-ranging immunities in the exercise of its powers so that, in effect, it is outside the scrutiny of the governments of

the states who sign up to it.

A government which was only elected in February 2011 on a wave of popular discontent with the way in which the Irish economy was being managed in favour of banks and other financial institutions, now wishes to pass into law a treaty which would actually allow a body outside

popular discontent with the way in which the Irish economy was to law a treaty to allow a body outside Ireland, one which is not expenditure...

an Union, or declare that enough's enough

Ireland, one which is not accountable to the Irish people, to control Irish revenue and expenditure.

The ESM will be able to order Ireland to raise sovereign debt and then hand it over to a body which will then decide where, when, whether and how to use it. Once the debt is handed over, the Irish government will have no claim to it or any say whatsoever in how to use it. Astonishing – vote Yes and wave the resources of the country away.

But at this stage in the referendum campaign, it is clear that the Irish government has a fight on its hands to secure a Yes vote, and current indications are that the referendum will be lost. But what then? What if the Irish people do vote to reject the treaty? Will that be the end of the matter? Will the EU technocrats say, “fair enough – we tried but in true democratic fashion the Irish people have spoken and said No. We must respect this and look at alternatives.” Of course not – Ireland has been here before and has learnt the hard way that saying No is not the correct response, and leads to the EU forcing another referendum upon them until the answer is Yes.

This happened when the Irish, anxious about the seemingly interminable loss of their sovereignty, rejected the Treaty of Nice in 2001 and the Treaty of Lisbon in 2008. Impervious to any sort of democratic restraint, the EU launched a sustained campaign of lies, threats and bribery to secure a Yes vote in a repeat referendum.

Far from respecting Ireland's decision, Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson and European Commission President Romano Prodi said in response to the rejection of the Treaty of Nice in 2001, “The Member States and the Commission will pursue the enlargement negotiations with undiminished vigour and determination in line with our firm commitment given to the applicant countries.” In other words, to hell with what the Irish or anybody else want. This is going to happen because we say it is going to happen. So much for democracy, so much for the myth of independence and sovereignty.

Unless the Irish working class learn

from this and consider carefully the logic of rejection – that the real problem is not actually membership of the ESM but membership of the European Union itself – then the same thing will happen again whenever Ireland dares to vote No. For in a very real sense Ireland's current financial distress has been caused by membership of the European Union and subsequent adoption of the euro as its currency. The terms of the debate are even the same. According to the Irish government, Ireland must vote Yes. In the words of Joan Burton, an Irish Labour member of the government and Minister for Social Protection (An tAire Coimirce Sóisialaí), “saying Yes to the stability treaty is vital for a stable currency and for investor confidence.”

But who are these investors, these fairy godmothers, riding to Ireland's rescue without a care in the world and without a thought for their own wellbeing? They are exactly the same investors, the same financiers whose reckless investment in crooked property deals and nothing else led to the EU-directed Bank Guarantee that bankrupted the country in 2008. The ESM will simply provide them with another opportunity to enrich themselves on the backs of the further impoverishment of the Irish working class. As Marx says in the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO:

“Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguishes the Bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All old established national industries have been destroyed or are clearly being destroyed.”

This then is what the European Union is all about. Forget about social justice, forget about maintaining the peace in Europe, the European Union is designed to support this bourgeois class, in our day financial capitalists, by forcing member countries to abandon their own historically conditioned social contract between capital and labour, always, always to the benefit of capital. Because in Ireland one thing is certain: these so-called investors so courted by the Irish government, no matter how confident they become, will never

invest in things – industry, education, social welfare – that will actually benefit the Irish working class rather than their own short-term interest to make as much money as they can and then get out when the going is good. Why would they? They, at least, know what side they are on.

A vote in favour of the ESM will simply institutionalise austerity in Ireland for generations to come, will not create a single job, will lock down Irish economic activity at its current low level by shredding demand, create mass unemployment, impoverish Ireland and drive away its main resource – its working class. If Ireland says No on 31 May they must not allow themselves to be browbeaten again but continue to say No, No to the ESM, No to a Banker's State, No to the EU.

For over 800 years the Irish people have defined themselves in terms of resistance to oppression. They have fought for the right to determine their own future, in their own land and for the right for those who produce the wealth of the country to control how that wealth is used.

Not over yet

This fight is not over yet. One master has simply been replaced by another. As James Connolly puts it in LABOUR IN IRISH HISTORY:

“As we have again and again pointed out, the Irish question is a social question, the whole age long fight of the Irish people against their oppressors resolves itself, in the last analysis into a fight for the means of life, the sources of production in Ireland. Who would own and control these? The people or the invaders; and if the invaders, which set of them – the most recent swarm of land thieves, or the sons of the thieves of a former generation?”

Call them what you like, the thieves and sons of thieves are still with us, still dictating how Ireland's wealth is owned and controlled. The main enemy for Ireland's working class and for all the working class of Europe is the European Union. Workers of all countries must unite to destroy it. The Irish working class can make a start by saying No on 31 May and continuing to say No. Enough is enough. ■

Despite having no representation in parliament, the British workers to restrain the pro-slavery leanings of the ruling class...

1861–1865: British workers and the American

IN DECEMBER 1860, 11 slave-owning states broke away from the United States of America to form the Confederacy. When Abraham Lincoln became President in March 1861, he denounced the secession as unconstitutional. April saw a Union blockade of Confederate ports and the onset of a bitter civil war.

Between 1840 and 1860 the United States provided 80 per cent of Britain's cotton. The Confederacy thought "cotton famine" caused by the blockade would cut off Lancashire's textile industry from its supplies of raw materials and propel Britain into conflict against the Union to end the blockade. But matters did not develop in that way.

Great distress overwhelmed the British cotton industry. Between 1861 and 1865 the Lancashire textile industry suffered a period of severe unemployment with over 320,000 workers unemployed out of 533,950 by November 1862; there were still 190,000 fewer jobs in December 1864.

Fairly ample stocks of cotton had been stored in British factories and warehouses. It was the speculative bidding up of the price for raw cotton that did damage, particularly hitting smaller manufacturers who could not withstand the strains of the high price. The crisis in the textile industry also gave British manufacturers the opportunity to extend the working day, depress wages and equip factories with labour-saving machinery.

The civil war acutely divided British opinion. Friends of the Confederacy in Britain came largely from the aristocracy (who had social and political ties with American slave-owners) and the commercial classes (who had business links and wanted to escape Union tariffs). These upper classes dominated parliament. Their newspapers – such as *THE TIMES* – openly advocated aiding the Confederacy.

But British workers, driven by a deep hatred of slavery and striving for a more democratic government at home, restrained the pro-confederate leanings of the government class. Though not represented in parliament, the working class was the preponderant part of society

and therefore not without political influence, able to pressure the government into adopting a policy of non-intervention in the civil war and thwarting assistance to the Confederate States.

At the beginning, northern US leaders asserted the main object of war was to preserve the Union and not to touch slavery. Lincoln's Emancipation of the Slaves Proclamation strengthened British workers' support for the Union cause. The spinners and weavers of Lancashire transcended their economic self-interest and took the lead in upholding the Union blockade. They realised that helping the slave-owners win would defeat the cause of freedom represented by the North and set back their own struggle for political reform in Britain.

Massive meetings

Throughout 1862 and 1863, massive pro-Union meetings were held by workers in Ashton-under-Lyne, Blackburn, Bury, Salford, Liverpool, Rochdale, Leeds, London and Edinburgh, calling on the government to not depart from strict neutrality in the conflict. On 31 December 1862, thousands of working men in the Manchester Free Trade Hall expressed sympathy with the North and called for Lincoln to eradicate slavery.

The efforts of those seeking to glorify the slave power and corrupt the minds of working people were utterly in vain. Working-class newspapers not only printed the Manchester meeting's ADDRESS TO LINCOLN but also President Lincoln's reply recognising British workers' sacrifice.

In order to ascertain the effects of the "cotton famine", *THE NEW YORK TIMES* sent a reporter to Lancashire in September 1862 who reported on the acute distress of the cotton manufacturing workers and came up with a practical suggestion – launching a campaign to send food aid supplies to Lancashire workers.

Meetings were held and money raised throughout the Union. On 9 January 1863, the *GEORGE GRISWOLD* relief ship, loaded with gifts of food, left New York to the cheers of spectators. Her cargo consisted of flour, bacon, pork, corn, bread, wheat and rice.



British workers transcended narrow economic self-interest

American stevedores loaded the ship without charge. Additional ships were soon sent: the *ACHILLES* and the *HOPE*.

When the *GRISWOLD* docked at Liverpool, all the dock workers refused payment for their services and the railways offered free transport. On 23 February 1863, 6,000 working men were at the Free Trade Hall (inside and out) to greet the arrival of the *GEORGE GRISWOLD*. One speaker observed, "If the North succeeded, liberty would be stimulated and encouraged in every country on the face of the earth; if they failed, despotism, like a great pall, would envelop our social and political institutions."

'The cause of labour is one'

On 26 March 1863, 3,000 skilled workers at St James Hall assembled in a pro-Union gathering organised by the London Trades Council to hear trade union speakers including a bricklayer, engineer, shoemaker, compositor, mason and joiner. Two contributors noted: "The cause of labour is one, all over the world" and "We

king class were able

an civil war



self-interest to support the Union cause.

are met here ... not merely as friends of Emancipation, but as friends of Reform." With the North's victory, a working class newspaper wrote "No nation is really strong where the majority of its citizens are deprived of a voice in the management of public affairs."

As a result of working-class resistance, Britain neither recognised the Confederacy nor intervened to break the blockade. Despite terrible hardships, particularly in the northwest, workers refused to allow their sufferings to be exploited by pro-Confederate sympathisers.

As Marx said, "It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic."

The American Civil War generated a broadening of horizons among British workers that blossomed even further in the First International.

More from our series on aspects of Marxist thinking

WORKING CLASS GOVERNANCE

Disenchantment and disillusion with the political system are widespread. Banks and big business set the agenda of politicians. There is little difference between the major parties, which submit slavishly to the whims of the market. With no real choice, people feel disenfranchised and disinclined to participate in bourgeois elections. Mistrust of politicians is commonplace and not just confined to the MPs' expenses scandal.

We live amid sophisticated technology and amazing scientific breakthroughs but our political system is archaic and outmoded. Its instinct is to stifle, thwart and deny the involvement of the people in running and controlling society even though the working class is the vast majority. Yet political life cannot stop evolving. To claim that mankind's ideological evolution has reached an end-point with the emergence of bourgeois parliaments and universal suffrage is mere wishful thinking and completely unhistorical.

People's strivings for a better way of arranging society are far from exhausted. History has not ended; it's somewhere in the middle. Though it's pointless to speculate and impossible to predict the exact arrangements needed to run socialist society, revolution will generate new forms of governance. There must be new methods of mass participation and involvement, to link and root the exercise of power and the shaping of national policy within the burgeoning networks of working class control – inside the actual workings of the whole economy.

Revolution will rescue politics from bourgeois models which restrict and reduce people's role to that of an "electorate" casting a vote every few years for "political representatives" then having no further involvement or role beyond passive and powerless observers of events set in train by a caste of professional politicians. Failing Westminster or EU-type parliaments will not suffice.

There will be no need for a breed of separate politicians – workers will assume and discharge the role of governance themselves. Revolutionary governance will be embedded inside and through an active working class, inside its permanent networks and through its levers of power. Compared with the slim pickings capitalism has offered, there will be a great expansion of democracy combined with a massive increase in responsibility. Workers will be obliged to determine how our country develops. Plans for the development and rebuilding of Britain will be discussed and set by a working class across industries and sectors.

Our class is so extensive that it has every skill and talent needed to run society within it. We have all the requirements to manage society. Revolutionary politics will harness them for the greater benefit of everyone within a growing economy.

Workers still have a world not only to win but also to shape.

Interested in these ideas?

- Go along to meetings in your part of the country, or join in study to help push forward the thinking of our class. Get in touch to find out how to take part.
- Get a list of our publications by sending an A5 sae to the address below, or by email.

WORKERS

78 Seymour Avenue, London N17 9EB

email info@workers.org.uk
www.workers.org.uk
 phone 020 8801 9543



Back to Front – Drive up wages

‘We should not fight for wages as individuals dependent on a state mechanism to set pay rates...’

THE GOVERNMENT recently announced that the national minimum wage is to rise from October 2012 for those 21 years and over – by 11 pence, from £6.08 to £6.19 an hour. For those aged 18 to 20 years, the princely sum of £4.98 an hour; 16- and 17-year-olds the luxurious sum of £3.68 an hour; and “apprentices” move up 5p to £2.65 an hour.

When it was introduced in 1998 the national minimum wage was trumpeted as an attempt to address low and poverty wages across workplaces and industries. And indeed an estimated 1.5 million workers benefited from the introduction of the minimum wage. But this has to be set against a history of Wages Boards having been in existence in Britain for the previous 80+ years setting minimum wages, for example in agriculture, hairdressing etc where it was felt workers could not fight for wages.

But what was seen by many as progressive in 1998 has now clearly shown itself as regressive, with employers trying to drive wages down from established higher bargaining rates won by the trade unions to a one-size-fits-all application of the national minimum wage for all.

And if the minimum wage is one form of the state depressing wages then so is the so-called campaigning for a “living wage”. Elaborate calculations which demonstrate that if only “nice”, “decent” philanthropic employers would pay £1, or £2, or £2.50 more than the minimum wage then we could obliterate poverty in our cities and all workers could happily raise their families secure, well-fed, warm, housed and smiling.

And there’ll have to be a living wage campaign running differently in different regions because these do-gooders have

swallowed hook, line and sinker the government’s lies and fantasies about regional pay.

We are all for the abolition of poverty but it is not achieved by begging campaigns or shaming campaigns against employers. Nor is it about believing that all work is the same or all skills are the same or that all wages should be the same.

It is a depression of wages to clamour for a living wage level as much as it is a depression of wages to set a national minimum wage as a safety net. It is not safety nets we want but springboards for driving wages up.

Some of the arguments presented for a living wage, or a “real” national minimum wage etc are as ridiculous as those demolished by Karl Marx in his *WAGES, PRICE AND PROFIT*, written in 1865 [£3.00 including postage from WORKERS]. The employers always try to depress wages; workers should try to raise wages.

Workers perhaps have forgotten how to do that after many years of pay review bodies and such like bailing them out. We have to challenge this almost benefit-dependency culture in our class of always waiting for a handout, always waiting for someone to do it for us. We should not fight for wages as individuals dependent on a state mechanism to set pay rates.

Wages in Britain are being driven down; the value of our take home pay is diminished as other necessities of life – food, shelter, clothing, fuel – are rising in price. We have to fight for wages, and do so collectively. That means combining together, building the trade unions – rebuilding them in some cases – and re-directing our unions if needs be. ■

Subscriptions

Take a regular copy of WORKERS. The cost for a year’s issues (no issue in August) delivered direct to you every month, including postage, is £15.

Name

Address

Postcode

Cheques payable to “WORKERS”. Send along with completed subscriptions form (or photocopy) to WORKERS 78 Seymour Avenue, London N17 9EB

Publications

WHERE’S THE PARTY?

“If you have preconceived ideas of what a communist is, forget them and read this booklet. You may find yourself agreeing with our views.” Free of jargon and instructions on how to think, this entertaining and thought-provoking pamphlet is an ideal introduction to communist politics. (Send an A5 sae.)

BRITAIN AND THE EU

Refutes some of the main arguments in favour of Britain’s membership of the EU and proposes an independent future for our country. (50p plus an A5 sae.)

To order...

Copies of these pamphlets and a fuller list of material can be obtained from CPBML PUBLICATIONS, 78 Seymour Avenue, London N17 9EB. Prices include postage. Please make all cheques payable to “WORKERS”.

Workers on the Web

• Highlights from this and other issues of WORKERS can be found on our website, www.workers.org.uk, as well as information about the CPBML, its policies, and how to contact us.