

WORKERS

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THE FIGHT TO ORGANISE BUILDING



School's out Teachers, lecturers call strikes

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WORKERS

Two glimpses of the future

OUR PARTY has said that capitalism is in absolute decline and that if our class, the working class, does not take steps to replace it with something else, then we will go down with it. Only now are we beginning to glimpse what that might look like.

With oil likely to reach \$150 per barrel the consequences look catastrophic. Transportation of all commodities will raise prices across the board. Food prices have soared, driven by increases in fuel prices, the diversion of crops as biofuel, and rising demand.

Food riots have broken out in some countries. More will follow. Petrol seems likely to rise to £1.50 a litre here, and gas and electricity prices have rocketed.

The world banking system is on the verge of collapse. The Bank of England wants all of us as taxpayers to take on the banks' dodgy loans and make borrowing more expensive for us. This, after they have been encouraging ordinary people to create a mountain of debt while our lowest paid have had their income tax increased. Pensions are being almost abolished for the next generation.

Manufacturing has collapsed in Britain and the US now follows, with unemployment rising. Everything must be privatised, whether it is water supply in Africa, or polyclinics here.

Capitalism wants to make money out of everything that moves. And the whole working

class is being outsourced by promoting worldwide migration to set worker against worker.

Meanwhile, the US and EU talk of more military intervention, in Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Zimbabwe. The people of Iraq and Afghanistan have already suffered this version of the future. We are fed the virtues of "democracy" that brings billionaire demagogue Berlusconi to power. Gordon Brown in his US speech calls on the US to lead the world in reforming the UN to become the saviour of world capitalism in decline.

This is the nightmare world that capitalism is sinking us into. But there are those who thought like us and did something about it. The high price of oil brings wealth into Venezuela to develop new economic structures for its working class, increasing employment, education, literacy, health, living standards and power. It makes deals with poor Caribbean countries to sell oil at around \$20 per barrel and makes similar ones with other poor Latin American nations.

Cuba is building free health systems and literacy programmes in 80 countries and Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba have set up a bank independent of the crisis-ridden world banking system.

The two glimpses of the future could not be more different.



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EUROTRASH

The latest from Brussels

Back clean coal, govt. urged

A JOINT TUC, employers, research organisations and coal companies report has issued an urgent call to the government to support clean coal technology as the future path for Britain's looming energy crisis. The move follows a request from power company E.ON to ministers to delay planning for the new Kingsnorth coal-fired clean coal power station until the government decides on standards for so-called CCS – carbon capture and storage technology.

At the same time the price of a barrel of oil has soared to over \$110 with pump prices in Britain forecast to rise to £1.50p a litre (in 1999 the price of a barrel of oil was predicted to drop to \$5 or less).

Scientists indicate that there are new technological advances in ways of handling the 60,000 tonnes of nuclear waste and guaranteeing over 60 per cent of Britain's electricity supply until at least 2060. Both the clean coal technology and nuclear options would counter the continued dash for imported gas. Only these two technologies – not gas – will lead to reductions in carbon emissions.

Meanwhile, there is deafening silence from the government – except on the future of British Energy, Britain's nuclear generator. The company is going up for auction and the government has ensured it is a two-horse race between EDF of France and RWE of Germany. British companies such as Centrica (ex-British Gas) have been blocked.

The £11 billion sell-off will place the whole future of nuclear generation and rebuild in foreign hands. This follows a similar move last year over decommissioning, which ensured that only US companies were allowed on the preferred bidders' lists.

The US Energy Solutions sees its ownership of the ten decommissioned Magnox sites as a counter to either a French or German nuclear industry. But within ten years one consortium will have devoured the other. Private monopoly in nuclear generation will be the norm.

Despite this, the government foresees no new nuclear generation – only replacement capacity: political cowardice in the face of the anti-industry "green" lobby. Indecision over new generation will result in shortages and power cuts; it will lead to rationing by price, which has already been introduced by the huge hikes in recent months. Surprise: utility companies are registering unprecedented profit returns.

Britain, once self-sufficient in energy, with significant energy reserves in gas, coal, oil and a thriving nuclear industry, now sees itself as a major importer of all energy resources while Brown whinges on about wind and tidal alternatives, but by themselves these can never provide for Britain's needs. Pretty appropriate for parliamentary windbags!

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

TRANSPORT**RMT wins written undertakings**

THE RMT has called off a planned 48-hour strike by 2,500 tube maintenance workers at Metronet, due to start on 28 April.

"We now have in writing undertakings that when the Metronet contracts are taken back in-house by Transport for London (TfL) there will be no outsourcing, and that all Metronet staff will be entitled to join the TfL pension fund and enjoy the same travel facilities as other TfL employees," said RMT general secretary Bob Crow.

OIL**Pensions strike at Grangemouth**

AS WORKERS went to press, 1,200 workers at the huge Grangemouth refinery in Scotland were due to strike on 27 and 28 April over owner Ineos's plans to close the final salary pension scheme to new entrants and reduce provision for existing members, says Unite. The strike ballot drew a 97 per cent vote in favour.

The Grangemouth refinery, once owned by BP and Scotland's only major refinery, produces 200,000 barrels of fuel a day – and makes £3 million in profit a day.

Unite says that a two-day strike will shut the North Sea and effectively stop production at the plant for up to a month.

EUOTRASH

The latest from Brussels

Fish quotas: sinking our fleets

STRICT EU quotas threaten the extinction of fishing fleets. In the past 12 years 1,000 small boats have disappeared from British ports. Remaining fishermen are now struggling to chase the 3 per cent of the allowed catch of valuable fish species, including cod, haddock and monkfish.

Now they're targeting our mince

THE EUROPEAN Commission wants to ban wholesalers from selling beef mince from carcasses slaughtered more than six days previously. Quality British beef is traditionally hung for 28 days to enrich flavour. Around 20 per cent of the carcass is used for mince: the rule would render our quality beef industry uneconomic. The regulation is designed to protect the French, who eat steak tartare (raw minced beef). In Britain mince is cooked. The British Food Standards Agency says there is no evidence that 28-day hung beef kept well chilled poses any risk to health.

Renewable targets

EU TARGETS for renewable energy will add £465 a year to British family energy bills. To meet those targets the government has revived plans for the Severn Barrage, costing £20 billion; building 10,000 wind turbines instead would not be possible. One modern nuclear power station costing £2.7 billion could generate almost as much electricity as the barrage.

How about another billion?

BRITAIN'S net financial contribution to the EU will rise by almost £1 billion this year to more than £4 billion. Gordon Brown told us in last year's budget that the amount would be £3.3 billion. Even larger net payments are due in coming years: £6.1 billion in 2008-09 and £6.4 billion in 2009-10. The rises result from Blair's 2005 agreement, backed by Brown, to cuts in our rebate.

EU outlaws union agreements

THE EU'S European Court of Justice has decided foreign companies don't have to follow collective agreements. with unions In the Ruffert case on 3 April, it ruled in favour of free labour movement and against a German law requiring a Polish company to pay according to the regional collective agreement with unions rather than the national minimum wage.



Photo: Workers

March 2006: Natfhe and the AUT take joint action over pay. Now merged into a single union, the UCU, they are taking national action over pay again.

Lecturers vote for strike

COLLEGE LECTURERS in England have voted to strike on Thursday 24 April in support of their pay claim for a 6 per cent rise or £1500, whichever is the greater, for 2008-9. The University and College Union balloted 27,500 union members in 257 colleges. On a turnout of 38.6 per cent, 65.5 per cent of those voting supported strike action and 86.2 per cent also supported action short of a strike.

A major independent study, soon to be published by UCU, reveals high levels of staff dissatisfaction and low morale throughout colleges in England. In both schools and colleges, many teaching professionals believe their employers are ignoring their professional status and serving business interests at the expense of educational needs.

Growing workloads are also a major concern. As well as teaching, lecturers carry out course development, lesson preparation, marking, professional development and administration. A quarter of lecturers already teach more than 850 hours a year, jeopardising quality. The lecturers want negotiations on common conditions of service across all colleges.

Sally Hunt, general secretary of UCU, said, "It is more than four years since FE employers agreed to move lecturers to the same length pay scales as school teachers but 47 per cent of colleges still haven't done that. The treatment of FE staff is a scandal. Further education is central to the government's plans for re-skilling the nation but colleges must also serve their communities, not simply be factories for qualifications."

UCU, the teachers' union NUT and the National Union of Students have recently launched a wider joint campaign, "Our schools, Our colleges, Our communities", to draw attention to the threats to the quality of local public education.

MIGRATION

Lords report rebuffs govt.

A NEW report by the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, 'The Economic Impact of Immigration', rejects the government's claim that a high level of immigration is needed to prevent labour shortages, describing the claim as "fundamentally flawed".

The report notes that immigration suits employers. It says competition from immigrants has had a negative impact on the low paid and on training and apprenticeships for young British workers, and has contributed to high house prices.

Of the government's new points-based system, which breaks immigration into five new tiers based largely on earning power,

the report says, "It is not clear whether the new system will in fact constitute the radical overhaul of the UK's immigration system suggested by the government."

It says that the government's use of GDP as the measure of immigration's economic contribution is "irrelevant and misleading". Instead, GDP per capita – income per head of the population – would be a better measure. "Our general conclusion is that the economic benefits of positive net immigration are small or insignificant."

This report should help to raise the debate from its present low level, although it leaves some questions unanswered. Why does it discount the possibility of stopping immigration from the EU, which is after all the largest source of immigrants?

MIDLANDS

Eroding the skills base

POWER COMPANY E.ON is to move nearly 200 skilled jobs from its headquarters in Coventry to Düsseldorf. In response, Midlands TUC Regional Secretary Roger McKenzie said, "We are constantly told that the future for the UK is in high skilled, high value work in order that we can compete in a global market. It is particularly galling therefore when members of our highly skilled workforce

find that their jobs are exported."

Coventry has seen a massive structural change in employment over the last few years with many engineering and manufacturing giants ceasing production or moving it abroad.

The job losses follow those at Peugeot, Jaguar, Massey Ferguson and Marconi and, said McKenzie, will cost the local economy up to £6.5 million in lost wages.

E.ON's announcement comes in the wake of news that the Learning and Skills Council will be wound down by 2010, itself placing many jobs under threat. The region is being strangled to death.

NUT strikes over pay

AS WORKERS GOES to press, school teachers were due to stage their first strike action over pay for 21 years, on 24 April. Members of the National Union of Teachers voted 3 to 1 in favour of strike action in a 32 per cent turnout. Leaders of the other teaching unions have accepted the pay offer of 2.45 per cent this year in a settlement amounting to 7.05 per cent over three years.

The NUT points out that the true inflation rate is well above this level, with housing, fuel and food costs rocketing and young teachers with big student debts unable to manage on their pay. This year has seen a significant decrease in teacher training applications – a dangerous sign for the health of the education system.

The NUT has built a good campaign to encourage its 200,000 members to come out on the day, producing useful materials for local associations to use, focusing on the pay issue and avoiding the ultra-left trap of turning the strike into one about a long list of gripes. The challenge is to achieve united collective action within the NUT at least – something teachers have not done for a long while. A large number of regional events and rallies are being held on the day. The union is not calling for picket lines to be set up outside schools – the "virtual" picket line inside the school being much more effective.

Many members of the other teaching unions are angry their unions have not joined the action, but they have not forced the issue so have themselves to blame. Most local authorities are likely to advise against disciplining non-NUT staff who join the strike or refuse to cover for striking colleagues, hoping this will be a flash in the pan, and aware that many schools will close anyway.

The tragic sudden death in March of Steve Sinnott, NUT general secretary, has not been allowed to weaken the campaign. Other weaknesses are clear. Only six of the 83 semi-independent academy schools could be balloted, because they do not work to national pay norms.

School teachers' pay is determined by the School Teachers' Review Body without negotiation, leaving the unions having to react instead of setting the agenda. This will have to be dealt with for teachers to move forward. Other teaching unions remain in the government's pocket, working in "partnership" to betray members' interests unchallenged by their membership. The NUT will have to lead the way.

TRANSPORT

Pay as you drive

SOME 1.8 million people signed an online petition against road charging last year. As with the 2 million people who marched against the launch of the Iraq War, the government has decided to ignore these objections.

On top of the government's new "anti-terrorism legislation" with the proposed 42-day internment, and the planned national ID card – the government has come up

with a personalised latter-day poll tax: plans recently revealed indicate a minimum charge of £1.34p a mile "pay as you drive" scheme for Britain's 30 million drivers. The scheme, based on satellite technology, will monitor all drivers' movements.

Britain is already the most spied-upon country in Europe, with more CCTV cameras than anywhere else in Europe.

From carbon footprints, sub-prime mortgages and now mileage satellite spies, if only they could work out how to tax the air we breathe...

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

MAY

London, Thursday 1 May, 7.30 pm

Let's plan for a future

May Day rally and celebration of the 40th anniversary of the CPBML. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

Music, speeches, refreshments and good company.

Edinburgh, Saturday 3 May, 6.30 pm

Let's plan for a future

May Day rally and celebration of the 40th anniversary of the CPBML. Word Power Bookshop, 43 West Nicolson Street, Edinburgh EH8 9DB

Speakers, music and good company.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

2,000 into 1,000 won't go

LOCAL GOVERNMENT staff in Newham, east London, must regard with some amusement the council's desire to move most of them into its Building 1000 project in Docklands. The council wants 2,000 workers on one site, though at the most the building can only take 1,500 staff.

This glass warehouse will see the ultimate in hot-desking: no fixed workstations, no offices, home working, mobile working, working out of the boot of your car. No photos of the kids on the desks, no plants, no union posters, just transient staff wandering about looking for a seat. Huge savings are planned through reducing, closing or selling between 25 and 30 sites

The whole idea of is to destroy collective identity. This is architecture as a weapon of class oppression masked with technology and supposed efficiencies. The unions have been told that no trade union facilities or space are available.

The aim is to get the unions out of this largest concentration of Newham staff, assisted to a large degree by the local unions, especially some in Unison whose sectarianism, abuse of facilities and kamikaze approach to industrial relations have alienated swathes of their own members and potential recruits.

So new thinking is required. If there are no fixed desks, notice boards or TU office, then every member in Building 1000 can be a walking advertisement – badges, shoulder bags, ties, diaries etc. They can take the union out of an office but they cannot take the union out of the members.



1968–2008

**MAY DAY
MEETINGS:
CELEBRATION
OF THE 40TH
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE CPBML**

**“LET’S PLAN
FOR A
FUTURE”**

**THURSDAY 1 MAY, 7.30 PM, CONWAY
HALL, RED LION SQUARE, LONDON
WC1R 4RL**

**SATURDAY 3 MAY, 6.30 PM, WORD
POWER BOOKSHOP, 43 WEST
NICHOLSON ST, EDINBURGH EH8 9DB
MUSIC, SPEECHES, REFRESHMENTS
(LONDON), AND PLENTY OF GOOD
COMPANY.**

ALL WELCOME

**What could be more Newcastle
than a bottle of Newcastle
Brown? These days, anything...**

Going to the Dog



IF EVER a commodity was associated with a particular region or city, surely Newcastle Brown Ale must have been it. The iconic blue star on the label glowed above the brewery next to St. James Park where it was also emblazoned on the Magpies’ black and white shirts. Legends about the one-time potency of a bottle of “Dog” were exchanged across many a bar, along with suspicions about more feeble brews emanating from the South, Teesside for example.

Newcastle Brown Ale remains potent, but as a symbol these days. The brewery has been demolished to make way for another mall and more retail intoxication; while the Toon’s struggle against relegation is epitomised by having Northern Rock on the shirt rather than the blue star. And “Newkie Brown” is now brewed and bottled not in Newcastle, but across the water in Dunston (not very South, but South none the less) and might be more properly known as Gateshead Brown.

In a globalised economy, though, what’s in a name? Scottish and Newcastle, brewers of the brown ale, have other beers that have travelled somewhat farther. Kronenbourg 1664 is not as continental as it sounds, produced as it is by S&N in Reading, as is that quintessential antipodean tippie, Fosters. No need for corks on the hat in the Thames Valley unless global warming is really taking a hold. In which case the chilled lager drawn to slake the thirst will, in this case, be English, whatever it suggests on the tin.

Takeover time

Not for much longer, however, certainly from 2010 as the Reading plant closes with the loss of 362 jobs. Indeed, although some of the production is to move to Dunston, along with other sites such as Tadcaster and the Royal Brewery Manchester, it won’t be S&N brewing any of them, not even Brown Ale. Carlsberg and Heineken are carrying out a joint takeover worth £7.8 billion with Scottish and Newcastle being broken up between them. Good news for the “old Dog” maybe as it could secure the future of the Dunston brewery.

Nick Brown, Minister for the North East, wrote to the new management emphasising the importance of the Brown brand (it’s presumed he was referring to the ale and not himself or the prime minister) to the Newcastle region. “I am delighted that they have accepted this,” he is quoted as saying, “...the latest shake-up is very good news for the North East.” His sentiments received support from Jim Cousins, MP for Newcastle Central. “This appears to mean that Newcastle Brown Ale will continue to be brewed on Tyneside for the foreseeable future.” And Dave Anderson, Blaydon MP, joined in with, “The brewery is a significant employer in our area...” He also took this was an indication of intention for North Eastern brewing.

Nick Brown may well be “delighted” but there must be 362 employees and their families in Reading who are rather less so at the prospect. Brother Brown might take a somewhat different view if his role in serving the capitalist state wasn’t quite so parochial. Divide and rule is a venerable principle, but it does not require any dark conspiracy to implement. It is in the nature of capitalism as this example shows.



Photos: Workers

St James's Park, home of Newcastle United: "Whether NUFC players run around with blue stars on their chests or the name of a failing bank is a purely commercial decision."

All that has occurred involving the take over of S&N is normal, above board business practice. It is not a decision made out of spite, neither some dislike of the workers of Reading nor any regard for North Eastern tradition other than as a marketing tool. Yet by such instruments is worker pitted against worker, at least by immediate interest.

Even the union is divided by it. Unite, the union representing the 3000 S&N workers announced it was outraged by the closure and claimed no business case for it had been made by the company. However, the North East regional officer of Unite is quoted as saying, "The announcement looks good for Dunston..." and goes on to comment that it will mean more jobs.

He also points out this will be to the detriment of Berkshire colleagues. Somehow "colleague" sounds less committed than "comrade". If Unite want a business case then that is simply supplied. Stephen Glancey, S&N's group operations director pointed out it would save the company £13 million a year, i.e. an extra £13 million profit per annum for the balance sheet.

There is no requirement for any of the Labour MPs quoted here to be disingenuous or actively moving against the working class. Indeed Jim Cousins stated, "...we must keep a close eye on what the new owners do"; after all, if Fosters can be brewed in Reading, and then Dunston, why not Timbuktu, Trinidad or Toronto if another £13 million could be saved? Or move the production of Brown Ale to Australia – after all there's a Newcastle there to secure the brand.

The irrelevance of region

The Labour government is keen to regionalise and tried to sell the North East Assembly as a governing forum that could protect local interests. In this case North Eastern interests have been enhanced through a business decision sanctioned by a Danish and a Dutch company and those companies could just as easily take away those interests.

A regional assembly, or its absence, is irrelevant. Nick Brown might be Minister for the North East, but he is powerless to do any more than celebrate, or lament as political figures around Reading are undoubtedly doing.

The limitations of parliamentary democracy in the face of the capitalist imperative are well illustrated by this case. It is all very well for Dave Anderson to opine, "This is good news for beer drinkers of the North...I hope the new owners build on our great brewing heritage to develop and secure its long term future here."

The key word here is "hope" for that is all he can do; no matter how strong his majority, if the new owners decide greater profit can be made by moving Brown Ale production elsewhere then that very small minority of executives will prevail.

Brown Ale, along with all other products, is merely a commodity whose value can only be realised through sale and the profit maximised by reducing production costs to the minimum required. Whether NUFC players run around with blue stars on their chests or the name of a failing bank is a purely commercial decision.

And as for heritage? The only heritage that counts for the working class is its own organised strength and experience, which must not be subverted by the pitching of one group against another.

The demand for labour in the construction industry is rising. Go
refusing to discourage indirect labour, it's not necessarily good
jobs on building sites...

Construction: contracts for the companies,



Photo: Workers

Construction site in Newcastle

A CURSORY glance around Britain's towns and cities reveals construction work being undertaken nearly everywhere one looks, and one could be forgiven for thinking that the industry is thriving. Representing some 10 per cent of GDP and with 2.1 million workers, it continues to grow. Indeed, such is the demand for labour that for the next five years, an additional 90,000 workers are needed annually.

At first, this may sound like good news. Yet there are predictions, from both the employers and trade union side, of continuing and worsening shortages of skilled labour affecting crucial construction projects. Good news for some perhaps, as shortages could push up the price of labour for certain skills, but will they? Good news for those employers who have won lucrative contracts. But what are the prospects for Britain's construction workers? What of the future and the skills we need as a working class here?

The construction industry is fragmented yet employs as much as 10 per cent of Britain's workforce. It is dominated by small firms – fewer than 10 per cent of the 200,000 plus employers have more

than 13 workers and overall union density is less than 20 per cent. Yet over the years, standards in all spheres have been raised, through organisation and struggle.

Working in the construction industry is dangerous and transient by nature, and the workforce is an ageing one (average age 54). For example, of the 1,500 qualified steel erectors in Britain – crucial to any significant build – at least 500 will have retired by 2012. These workers have an enormous amount of knowledge and skill, not least in the art of struggle, which will be lost unless replaced.

Three main unions

Union involvement is historic with three principal unions, Unite (Amicus and T&G), Ucat, and the GMB. Traditionally, Ucat has covered such trades as carpenters, painting/decorating, brick-layers etc (the biblical trades); GMB the welders and platers; and Unite (through its series of mergers and transfers of engagement) all other trades in mechanical and electrical engineering, plumbing, civilian defence and transport.

Union organisation is difficult for many

reasons – jobs finish and the workforce move on; the sheer number of small firms; agencies; bogus self-employment and migrant labour to name but some. There are organisations which set standards but these are achieved for only some. For the majority they remain out of reach. There are National Agreements and the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI – Blue Book) for the engineering construction industry; Joint Industry Boards (JIB Electrical and Scottish JIB) for the Electrical Contracting Industry; HVAC for heating and ventilation; JIB Plumbing, SNIJIB, MPA. Needless to say, the agreements only cover those employers who belong to their respective organisations and that is by no means all. National agreements have to be asserted and require perpetual vigilance – just as laws are reactive and remedial not proactive or pre-emptive.

Agency working and bogus self-employment are rife and in many cases have been actively connived at, seen as a tax dodge. Short-term thinking in a way Thatcher would be proud of. Scotland has the highest proportion of direct labour, but

od news? With the government relying on migration and
for Britain's construction workers, and the thousands who want

insecurity for the workers

this declines the further south one travels until London where it is thought that over 92 per cent of painters and decorators are self-employed, and no training can be found. Of the mechanical and electrical workers in the building of the Emirates Stadium at Arsenal football ground 77 per cent were from agencies.

So has this section of workers failed to struggle? A government report says that there was an 83 per cent decline in "recorded" stoppages in ten years to 2005. This gives the impression that workers have gone or are going to sleep; that the conflict between labour and capital has ceased. It hasn't.

Uneven development

There is uneven development and there are regular examples of workers "cabining up", examples of localised action which are rarely reported or recorded. Illegal "in the eyes of law" and in breach of the national agreements, these actions are often sparked by such things as mistreatment, an affront to dignity, safety, and payment irregularity. Sometimes it is for advance, sometimes on a national scale, sometimes from a purely self interested perspective – as is every worker's right, if not duty.

Organisation is strongest on Blue Book sites, where workers often know each other from previous jobs and form a core of organised labour, responsible for driving up skills, safety and standards. Category 1 sites (major new construction projects)

"The construction industry is fragmented yet employs as much as 10 per cent of Britain's workforce..."

have auditors to monitor every aspect of the job, but that doesn't mean everything is automatic, demanding unions' vigilance over employer practices – 'twas ever thus. Last year, the country's first national strike across all main sites in years was averted; a consultative ballot showed overwhelming support for action. The employers had insisted that the wage agreement include the buying out of the tea break at a price of 60p for every hour worked. But before anyone scoffs, think of working between five and seven hours in either freezing or hot conditions – the workforce nationally told the employers they could offer £10 an hour but the break was not for sale – the employers backed down.

When it comes to apprenticeships and training even the employers bleat loudly about the shortage of skilled labour, yet unsurprisingly do not take on the thousands needing a workplace. Over the last 20 years there has been a decline of nearly 50 per cent in apprenticeships in the electrical industry, down from 5,000 a year to 2800.

With over 60,000 applying for the

paltry 6,000 training places, and an existing 7,000 unplaced workers who have passed the entrance test for traditional apprenticeships, clearly the employers do not see it as their problem. Why should they, when there is a seemingly endless supply of "off the peg" labour, primarily from eastern Europe?

Some may argue "it doesn't matter who builds it so long as it gets built anyway", but they are wrong. Migrant workers can always return home – the new Warsaw football stadium may prove interesting, unless of course it is contracted to foreign firms. Capital flows where return is greatest, and as far as construction goes, clearly this isn't into our future. There is not so much a skills shortage as an investment shortage.

The government shows its concern by cutting funding for training for NVQ Level 3, and given that government procurement accounts for some 47 per cent of all work, refuses to insist that all contractors who are awarded government contracts employ direct labour.

The need to organise the hundreds of thousands not in a union is clear. Let us not forget where real power lies, at the point of production, and make the demand for our youth to be trained is to demand a future for Britain and its workers. The demands are made but what do we do when they yet again pay mere lip service? Our best organised have to lead in the demand for a future. Time is against us.

Free movement of labour used to undermine rates

MIGRANT LABOUR and bogus self employment often go hand in hand and are being used increasingly on major projects. Also, more contracts are being awarded to foreign companies.

We all know that employers seek to exploit migrant labour to a greater extent than indigenous workers; we also know that a divided workforce, along any lines, only aids the employer. Language is often a problem for migrant workers, and many feel the resentment of indigenous workers who have out-of-work mates, skilled and

qualified, yet see a steady flow of foreign labour coming onto site. Some successes have been achieved, notably the recent improvement to air travel provision in the Blue Book. Polish workers were being made to travel from Plymouth to Luton before catching a flight to Poland for the long weekends, unpaid. Taking up the issue brought the majority into membership.

But in companies where there is no British labour, unionisation is shied away from – although these workers owe it to

those who have fought for the wages, terms and conditions they have while on a categorised site.

Additionally a recent judgment made by the EU's European Court of Justice gives foreign firms the right to ignore collective agreements and legally pay workers below agreed wage levels. The ruling enabled a Polish subcontractor in Germany to lawfully pay construction workers less than half the German construction industry's agreed wage. The implications for Britain are obvious.

People thought primary education was under pressure in the Thatcher era. Now the pressure has accelerated. The drive is to oust the professionals and replace them with the strictures of ignorant and often unelected ministers...

Primary education – who decides?

WHEN SCHOOLS minister Jim Knight told this year's conference of the teaching union ATL that a class size of 70 can work "very well" he was greeted with jeers from the delegates. Maybe because they actually have experience of teaching, and he only has his own public school background to go on – probably with class sizes of a bit less than 70 (the private sector average is 10-15).

The Labour tendency to promote people who are completely ignorant of their area of responsibility as ministers is particularly seen in Andrew Adonis, old chum of Blair given a peerage so he could become an education minister despite never having had to go through the tiresome procedure of getting himself elected. His agenda, directed by both Blair and Brown, has been to implement government policy by telling teachers what to teach and how to teach it, while deliberately ignoring the lessons about educational progress from properly conducted educational research.

History

The national curriculum was introduced 20 years ago, for the first time laying down exactly what should be taught every year group in every subject. National testing at ages 7, 11 and 14 followed – the Standard Assessment Tests or SATs – with results published in league tables of schools and local authorities.

In 1998 the national literacy and numeracy strategies were introduced for primary schools by the new Labour government. The literacy strategy was so prescriptive that one of its features was a clock which told teachers exactly what they should be teaching at every minute of the literacy hour.

In 2006 primary teachers were told they must teach reading with government-approved methods. The required method – synthetic phonics used to the exclusion of other teaching strategies – was decided by Lord Andrew Adonis on the basis of a short piece of very limited research in Scotland that fitted the political agenda of a simple, quick fix which can be easily policed by outsiders.

All this centralised prescription was



Northampton NUT members campaigning against SAT testing.

Photo: Workers

enforced by the creation in 1992 of the Office for Standards in Education – Ofsted – a nominally “independent” inspection regime which judges schools primarily on SATs results. Ofsted can put schools judged to be failing into Special Measures, which can have the effect of shutting them down. Under Labour Ofsted's powers have been hugely increased as the effect of a “failing” judgement has been used ever more punitively.

These developments have applied to England, while Scotland, Wales and northern Ireland have pretty much gone their own, different, way.

Teachers

So how has all this come about? The state's desire to control education is inevitable, given its importance for society. But until Thatcher the education unions were able to assert the agenda of those who are qualified to decide – education workers and researchers. But the relative weakness of the teacher unions in the 1980s gave ministers the opportunity to direct educational practice from the centre, and they seized it.

Those who thought things might be different under Labour after 1997 – even if teachers didn't start to fight for progress – have seen instead an accelerating government domination of education. The teaching unions have proved unwilling to offer serious resistance. The drive towards privatisation of and competition between educational institutions – for example the academies programme, which can vary nationally recognised teachers' pay and conditions – makes collective organisation more difficult.

At the heart of successful education is the relationship between the educator, the teacher, and the educated, the pupil. When a capitalist state by its nature interested primarily in the maximisation of profit is allowed to place itself in the centre of this relationship, things are going to go wrong.

Increasingly, concerns have been raised about the effects of government domination over the curriculum, particularly in British primary schools, which were once highly regarded by education experts nationally and internationally. In spite of an apparently

catcher years. But since 1997 government domination of s and have every aspect of every lesson taught according to the

broad primary national curriculum, teachers began to report a significant narrowing in practice to what is tested through the SATs (a narrow, easily testable band of literacy, numeracy and science). The effects of this were being felt in secondary schools, which received pupils often intensively coached to get through the SATs but who had lost their enthusiasm for learning.

In response, the independent Cambridge-based Primary Review, launched in 2006, used 22 eminent researchers in 70 universities to look at childhood and primary education in 21st century Britain. Its final report is due to be published in late 2008, but its 23 interim reports already make interesting reading.

Government became so nervous about the findings emerging from the review that Ed Balls, education secretary, launched his own review, also called confusingly the Primary Review. Balls's review is being led by Jim Rose, author of the Rose Report into the teaching of reading – a report which has already led to a narrowing of the curriculum for 5- and 6-year olds.

Narrowing

The Cambridge review has confirmed what teachers knew already – that the triangulated stranglehold of SATs, league tables and Ofsted has had a disastrous effect. Increasingly teachers are expected to be obsessed with National Curriculum levels.

After the introduction of SATs, “Optional SATs” soon made their appearance – to test how children are progressing between 7 and 11 towards the desired Level 4, so that now children in many schools are constantly being tested in between. And teachers are expected to allocate sub-levels to the children in their class to ensure that all children progress by two sub-levels each year. Children falling behind receive booster classes to speed them up, and in the dreaded Year 6 (at age 11) classes are put on during the Easter holidays to coach children “at risk” of failing to reach Level 4.

Experienced Year 6 teachers have become good at this. There is little time in Year 6 for any curriculum other than what will be tested in the SATs, because the

teacher and the school will be considered successful or failing based on the results.

We are producing children who know the techniques for getting through the English tests, but who will not choose to read in their spare time, children who can achieve Level 4 in maths tests, but have no idea about why maths matters.

When the children go on to secondary school, many arrive armed with test results that do not reflect their true achievements. This is why, a few years ago, it was discovered that, hey presto, there is a “dip” in progress in the first year of secondary school. Whose fault is this? It's obvious – secondary teachers!

Widening gap

The Primary Review reports that, in spite of all this hothousing of primary children a sticky problem remains: the wide gap in attainment between the average and the lowest, often called the “long tail of underachievement”. This is one of the biggest in comparable countries, and reflects the widening gap in family incomes in Britain between the best off and the worst (getting wider under Labour) – one of the highest in developed European countries.

A recent report from the Rowntree Foundation stated that “children from poor homes are nearly a year behind when they start school, and two years behind by age 14. Most never catch up.” Children's educational attainment as measured by SATs broadly reflects parental income. Schools in poor areas consistently do worse in SATs than schools in better off areas. Children learn better where they have at least one parent in employment.

Now the catchphrase of government is “narrowing the gap”. Resources are being thrown at the problem in poorer local authorities without addressing the real issue. The government's Every Child Matters agenda requires schools to help children and families “achieve economic well-being” – one of the categories they are judged on by Ofsted. And this in areas where often there is little or no decent work to be had and high levels of immigration bring people prepared to take what work there is for below subsistence

Up in lights...

IN THE offices of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) there is an area called The Bridge. In this area is a big board with the name of every school in England. The names of those whose SATs results are not up to par are displayed in lights. These are the official Schools Causing Concern. A school whose name stays too long will get a visit from Ofsted, and the head teacher is likely to be pushed out.

Manton Primary school in Worksop, Nottinghamshire, whose head teacher Bill Ball had recently been nationally praised as excellent for his work in the school and the surrounding ex-pit community was one such school. Bill Ball was subsequently pressured to resign because of the school's SATs results, and the school is likely to close.

wages. And there is still evidence that children are imported into Britain to earn benefits for bogus “carers” – the very problem which led to the appalling death of 9-year-old Victoria Climbié at the hands of her so-called aunt and led, too, to the Every Child Matters policy.

The worrying decline in the quality of primary education reported in the Cambridge review results from central government control of the curriculum and its assessment. In response to findings so far, the NUT has called for government to review its whole method of evaluating schools, and to treat falling rolls as an opportunity to reduce class sizes. This will not happen unless teachers in the schools insist it should. The damage can be reversed, but only in the hands of teachers reasserting the pre-eminence of the teacher-pupil relationship.

We have allowed government to take control, now we must wrest it back. Teachers' collective power remains just a potential at present. The teachers' pay strike on 24 April needs to be used by teachers as a start to getting together in the unions to discuss the future of primary education and decide ways forward.

Newspapers and ministers that are encouraging mass migration lining up to back the Dalai Lama and the idea that Tibet must re

They say they want freedom for Tibet, but v

WHAT ARE we to make of the protests against the Olympic torch relay combined with calls to 'Free Tibet'? Let's start with the US award to the Dalai Lama of the Congressional Gold Medal in October 2007.

This award in Washington came at the end of a tour of western capitals during which the Dalai Lama's status was elevated to that of a head of state. This, by the way, was the same medal that was awarded to Tony Blair for his loyal service to the US over the invasion of Iraq, but unlike the Dalai Lama, Blair never dared to go to Washington to receive the medal because of the outrage that it would cause back home in Britain.

So why was the Dalai Lama awarded the medal? He is not an elected leader, but he claims to be a reincarnation, a God king. So it could not be for services to democracy. Perhaps, like Blair, it was for services to the USA.

At the award ceremony, the Dalai Lama condemned "Chinese immigration into Tibet that is destroying its culture", although the last census identified only 2.5 per cent of the population of Tibet as non Tibetan. Had he made similar remarks in Britain about how immigration was destroying British culture, he would have been condemned as racist and maybe prosecuted.

Race riots

We then hear about ethnic Tibetans rioting and killing Chinese-speaking residents, coinciding with the beginning of the Olympic Games torch relay. Again, if this had happened in Britain, it would have been called a race riot and the government would have cracked down hard.

China is building capitalism and as in any other industrial revolution, it has brought hardship and suffering to its burgeoning working class. This is something for the Chinese working class to deal with, as we did in Britain, by struggle and building working class organisations such as trade unions. But it is generally recognised that China will soon overtake the US and EU to become the dominant capitalist power in the world.

It is this that is at the heart of the

'Virtually every other country in the world has long recognised Tibet as part of China. ...'

US/EU inspired attempts to damage the Beijing Olympic Games and in the longer term break up China by supporting secessionist movements in the Chinese provinces of Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, all inalienably part of a sovereign China.

Drive to break up countries

This is nothing new: the same US/EU axis has broken up other countries such as Yugoslavia and the USSR in order to achieve dominance and they are currently trying to cause the breakaway of resource rich provinces in Venezuela and Bolivia. No surprise, then, that Tibet is rich in gold, uranium and timber. We are also seeing the US/EU expanding eastwards through NATO's swallowing not just of Croatia and Albania, but Ukraine and Georgia, thus seeking to control the Black Sea. This is the advance of an empire seeing competition from a re-emergent Russia and particularly a rapidly growing China.

The media also has its role in the plan, reporting only on the Chinese crackdown in Tibet and providing continuous live TV coverage of the anti Chinese actions while eyewitness accounts from journalists such as James Miles (*THE ECONOMIST*) are smothered. He reported "pogrom-like attacks by Tibetan gangs on non Tibetan members of the population including the Muslim minority. Shops of Tibetan merchants were marked and left unscathed whilst those of non Tibetans were plundered, destroyed and set alight." In one building alone, five textile saleswomen were burnt to death and a Canadian tourist described how a young non-Tibetan motorcyclist was 'mercilessly' beaten to death by a Tibetan gang.

So we have a political campaign of interference, based in the US, in the



Photo: Andrew Wiard/www.reportphotos.com

Demonstration in London, March 2008: part of an o

internal affairs of a sovereign country combining a rag bag of villains including the US State Department, the German and other EU governments, Richard Gere and his Hollywood pals, those closely linked to the CIA, and those wanting a return to feudalism and slavery in Tibet while monks practise mumbo jumbo and contribute nothing to society. Their foot soldiers here are those British "liberals" who probably think that anyone in the world has a right to come and live in Britain while Tibet must remain racially pure Tibetan and who almost certainly support the free movement of labour in the EU but not, of course, in China.

There is a long history of attempts by British and other outside forces to split Tibet away from China. In the eighteenth century, the Chinese had set up a protectorate over Tibet, which culminated in the constitutional revolution of 1750, when the last Tibetan lay rulers were removed. The British government recognised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in 1792, and again in the Anglo-Chinese

into Britain and free movement of labour across the EU are remain racially pure Tibetan...

what they want is to break up China



rganised attack on China's sovereignty

Conventions of 1876, 1890 and 1906 and in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. But this did not stop them from attacking Tibet from India in 1904, trying to split Tibet from China to use it as a base from which to put pressure on Russia. In 1911, British forces again invaded Tibet, to crush a Chinese nationalist army there.

Virtually every other country in the world has long recognised Tibet as part of China. In 1943 the United States

government formally reaffirmed that it had never raised a question regarding China's claim that Tibet was part of China. In 1949 and again in 1950 the United Nations refused to accept a claim by certain Tibetans that Tibet should be recognised as an independent nation and rejected their demand that the UN condemn "Chinese aggression".

In 1951 the People's Republic of China re-affirmed Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. In May 1951, the Dalai Lama's court signed a 17-Point Agreement with China acknowledging China's sovereignty over Tibet. Subsequently, China tried to turn Tibet's traditional theocracy into agents of gradual modernisation. But Tibet's feudal land-owning class, living off the serfdom of 95 per cent of the population, resisted all attempts at reform.

In 1958, some Khamba tribesmen, supported, directed and armed by the CIA, revolted against the government. In 1959, the CIA organised the Dalai Lama's departure to India. CIA planes flew air cover for the Dalai Lama's party hundreds of miles inside Tibet and strafed Chinese forces. The Dalai Lama's court then unilaterally abrogated the 1951 Agreement, leaving the PRC with no option but to quell the uprising.

Ever since, the Dalai Lama has refused to recognise China's sovereignty over Tibet. The PRC has worked to improve people's living conditions and to integrate Tibet into the mainstream of modern Chinese life. It rightly rejects attempts by outsiders to interfere in its internal affairs,

to de-stabilise China and force it back to its old condition of being split into warring states.

The principle of sovereignty

The principle here is the same one that applies to British workers in relation to the EU and the attempted break up of Britain – national sovereignty. The principle of national sovereignty has applied since the creation of the United Nations at the end of the Second World War. A nation's borders are inviolate and interference in the internal affairs of other nations is wrong.

This did not stop war in Vietnam or the overthrow of Latin American governments by the United States, but because of the existence of the USSR the principle more or less held. This was ended by the invasion of Iraq and Blair's doctrine of "liberal interventionism" which has now been elevated to a strategy by the US and the EU. It is this new neo con philosophy that is now being used to justify intervention in Chinese internal matters.

For us the argument is plain. Defend British national sovereignty against control by the EU or the US; defend the sovereignty of our class. Support others who defend their national sovereignty and oppose Blair's philosophy of interventionism. Who knows, what western capitalism may be scared of is that one day a mighty Chinese working class will rise up and re-take control of what may become the richest and most powerful country in the world.

Dark tale of Germany, Brussels and links to the CIA...

THE SECESSIONIST riots in Tibet were to be the starting point of a campaign devised at a conference held in Brussels in May 2007. They were to be followed by other Tibetan riots in Nepal and India and then the torch lighting ceremony in Olympia, Greece, when some "demonstrators" unfurled a "free Tibet" banner.

These "demonstrators" were in fact from Reporters sans Frontieres, an

organisation exposed by Canadian journalist Jean-Guy Allard as being part financed by the US National Endowment for Democracy and with ties to admitted CIA agents. Unesco recently distanced itself from RSF on Internet Freedom Day because of its lack of ethics.

The Brussels conference was attended by Paula Dobriansky, the Undersecretary of State in the US State Department and

the head of the Tibetan "government" in exile. It was hosted by a German Foreign Ministry front organisation, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, and supported by a small number of Hollywood celebrities. According to the plans devised by the conference, the anti-Chinese campaign will continue until the Olympics itself when it is intended to demonstrate daily in the centre of Beijing.

Our fifth article to mark the 40th anniversary of the CPBML by looking at four decades through the eyes of WORKERS and its predecessor, THE WORKER. This month we look at Labour's 1970s attempts to bring in state control.

1974: The fight against the Social Contract



AS PART of the celebration of our 40th anniversary, we look at our party's warnings about the dangers of voluntary emasculating inherent in the Social Contract introduced by the Labour Party in 1974. Following a series of confident working class struggles (including that of the engineers' toppling of the Tories' Industrial Relations Act and the miners' victory over Heath and his three-day week), the Labour Party launched its political counterattack, control of wages.

The lead article in THE WORKER issued on 21 March 1974 (see right), headlined "Who are they kidding?" and presciently subtitled "Labour's Social Contract – Accepting a clampdown in return for what we have already won", clearly and cogently outlined the threats posed.

“The Labour Government pretends that it ended the miners' strike and in return is expecting other sections of the working class to refrain from pressing comparable claims.

The miners had already won their battle for justifiable increases in pay before Labour took office.

Labour is making a big thing of tearing up anti-working class legislation like the Industrial Relations Act. In exchange restraint is expected on the part of trade unionists. But workers had already made this legislation inoperative by their own organised action.

Labour is apparently abandoning a wages policy and wants 'voluntary' self-

denial on the part of workers as a fair quid pro quo. But workers had already made the Counter-Inflation Act unworkable by their mass industrial action.

In other words, workers are being told that what they have won by their own struggle is a gift from a labour Government. Then in exchange for this 'gift' workers are being asked to accept more intense exploitation.

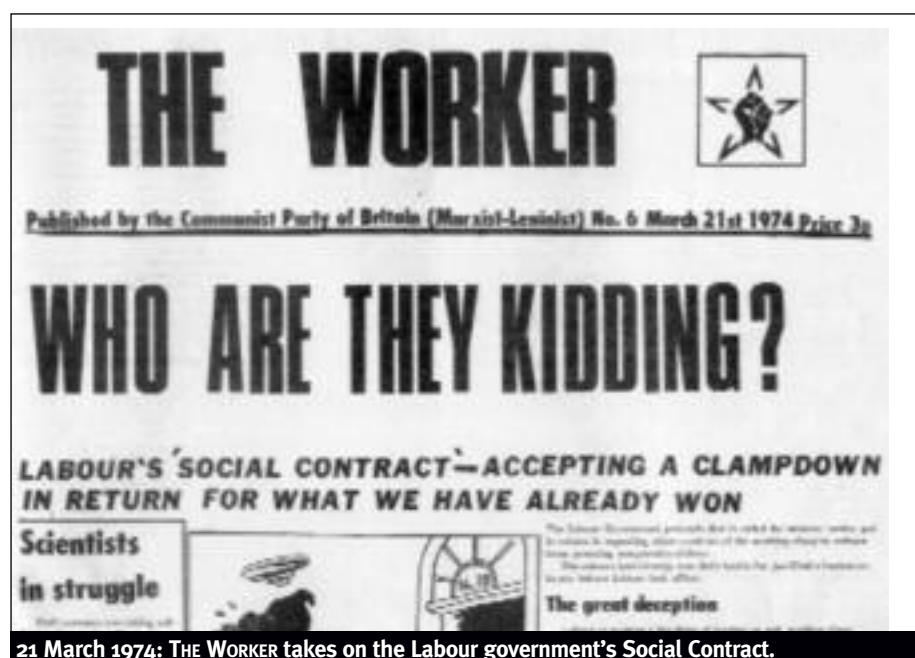
The TUC has its usual role to play in this attempted deception. The TUC General Council said in a statement on the political and economic situation that 'in response to the policies of the new Government it would be possible to influence the size of claims and settlements achieved.' In return for the Government's giving 'priority to the immediate repeal of the Industrial Relations Act, the Government is entitled

union movement and there will be moderation.'

There are millions of workers with claims outstanding – railwaymen, engineers, building workers, Ford workers and merchant seamen to mention only some. If they did fall for the deception the Labour government is trying to practice on them with the help of these so-called 'leaders', it would mean a punitive cut in workers' wages and even higher profits for the employers.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research has predicted that there will be further rises in prices this year from 14 to 18 per cent, more unemployment of over a million, falling production and a wider trade gap. The CBI is calling for a spirit of sacrifice – on the part of workers of course.

This critical situation will be used by



to understanding and support in its efforts to produce a solution to grave economic and social problems.'

This is the line taken by certain labour 'leaders' like the Secretary of the TGWU who has said that 'A government which is prepared to tackle these problems will certainly get the co-operation of the trade

the Labour Government to smuggle back its own version of wage-freeze and anti-trade union measures. The blueprint for them already exists.

We workers will not have it. We will not let them use the fruits of our own victories as bribes to get us to renounce struggle.”

Looking at the past
THE WORKER. This
rol of wages...

Later that year, in the 27 June issue, THE WORKER returned to the risks facing workers from the Social Contract and we re-print the perceptive opening and concluding paragraphs.

“The Labour Party is the major vehicle for the advancement of the corporate state; a fascist state rule which seeks to destroy the weapons of workers’ struggle and to subjugate the working class. The Labour Party’s pernicious role is to attempt to secure the acquiescence of the working class to its own enslavement. Every struggle in which British workers are involved today must be seen as not only a particular fight to defend their standard of living in a situation of capitalist-induced inflation, but also as part of the whole class’s general fight against the imposition of the fascist measure of wages fixed by government fiat.

The substitution of a government incomes policy for collective bargaining was itself a major step in the developing of the corporate state. However, there can be no doubt that the Labour Government wants something much firmer in the way of guaranteed wage restraint.

All these moves, TUC strengthening of the ‘social contract’, ‘concern’ for the lower paid, cunningly devised threshold agreements, are just so many attempts to rob workers of a right they have to defend – the right to use their collective strength to wrest a living wage from those who exploit them. The right of collective bargaining, like emancipation of the working class, is not something which can be bestowed on us from high. It can only be won and maintained by our own continuous struggle.

Because of the growing strength of the working class and the increasing weakening of British capitalism, collective bargaining is a right the ruling class can no longer afford to concede us if the profit system is to survive. The struggle for it, therefore, is a revolutionary struggle – a necessary phase in our protracted war to smash a system based on profits rather than on human needs.”

WHAT'S THE PARTY?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Back to Front – Bailing out bankers

‘Now that we are supposed to own Northern Rock we should have some say in how it is run...’

NORTHERN ROCK has said it will cut about 2,000 jobs by 2011 and reduce its residential mortgage lending by half. Unions have said they will fight any compulsory redundancies. In February the bank, having previously received loans of about £25 billion from the Bank of England, was finally transferred to public ownership with all shares handed over to the Treasury. But £45 billion of the highest value mortgages remained in a private offshore trust (Granite) based in Jersey. MPs rejected peers’ calls for an independent audit and for the bank to be covered by the Freedom of Information Act.

The Financial Services Authority is supposed to monitor the operation of Britain’s financial institutions. In the case of Northern Rock the authority’s own report showed that there had been inadequate record keeping, that proper notes were not taken of important meetings with the bank’s executives and that there was no rigorous assessment of serious business risks. The attitude seemed to be that “in extremis” the Bank of England would have no option but to bail out Britain’s fifth largest mortgage provider (using our money of course).

Northern Rock’s latest accounts reveal that £50 million was paid to City firms and professional advisers when the bank’s future was being discussed. In addition former chief executive Adam Applegarth, main architect of the bank’s greedy and reckless business practices, is to get £785,000 as part of his severance payment – and a £2.6 million pension.

When the CEOs of Railtrack and Marconi got huge rewards for failure, the government said the shareholders should stop them. The government now owns Northern Rock, yet the Prime Minister’s spokesman said that Applegarth’s payoff was “clearly a matter for Northern Rock, which operates independently

of government”.

Even the European Union is to get in on the act by launching its own investigation into Northern Rock’s bailout. EU regulators must approve the rescue plan. Danish banks have already made formal complaints to the European Commission alleging unfair competition in the European banking sector after Northern Rock was given state aid. Meanwhile, despite public ownership, the bank is up to its old tricks of aggressively pursuing borrowers who have missed payments on their mortgages. (Northern Rock tops the repossessions league table, with the number of claims approaching 1,000 per month.) Also it has been slow to pass on recent Bank of England interest rate cuts despite other lenders doing so straightaway.

Now that we are supposed to own Northern Rock we should have some say in how it is run. The first priority is to keep a roof over people’s heads. For example those borrowers who have only one mortgage on the house they occupy could have the mortgage converted into a state loan at a reasonable rate of interest.

Meanwhile, those who have taken out loans for second homes, particularly those members of our own class that have entered the odious “buy to let” market, should continue to pay a market rate of interest. That should leave this nationalised bank able to help people with just one home who may be in difficulties for whatever reason, such as unemployment or family breakdown.

Northern Rock used to be a mutually owned building society until enough of its members were bribed into voting for it to be turned into a privately owned bank by the offer of free shares. Those who are still shareholders are now facing the consequences of that decision and should expect no compensation.

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