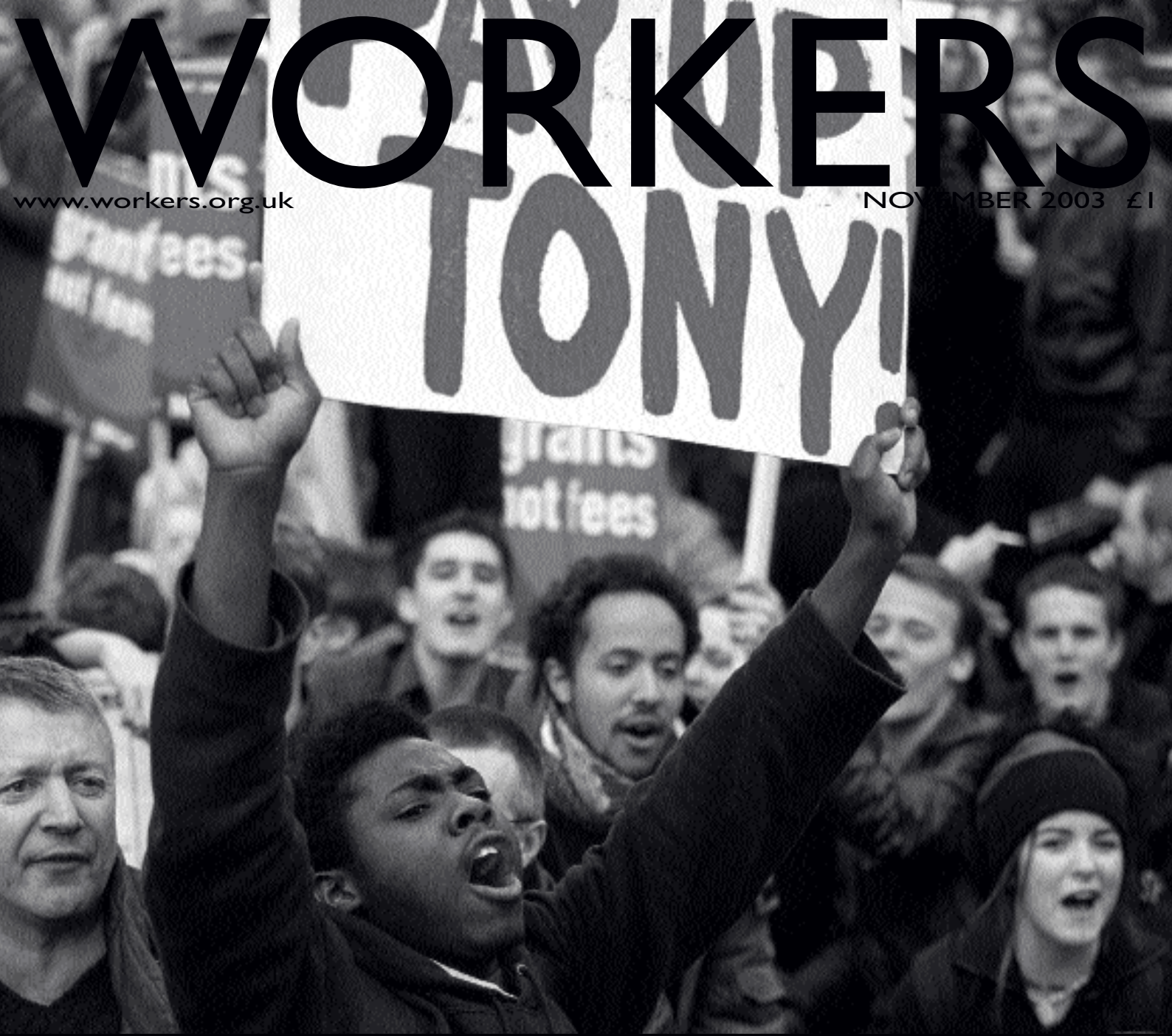


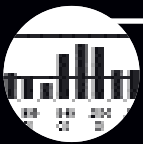
WORKERS

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WORKERS

First thoughts – No life after death

TWO OF THE MOST significant gatherings of workers take place in the autumn. First the TUC then the Labour Party Conference. The sun shines for the TUC and the leaves fall for the Labour Party.

This year the trade union sun shone more brightly than for many years. The TUC uncoupled the trade unions from the Foreign Office, from state control of effective trade unionism and from the de-industrialising agenda of the government. It expressed independence of thinking and revealed the sharp difference between the aspirations of workers and those of capitalism and its government.

Panic set in fairly quickly as a result. Rather than building on the strength of Congress and the aspirations of workers, the arrogant so-called 'Left' decided to try and channel the newfound clarity of the workers' movement into attempting to revitalise a dying Labour Party – notwithstanding the party's support for the government, which in turn hammers the workers.

Every manner of ad hoc, provisional, interim, self appointed, transitional committee

has been established to reclaim, rebuild, resuscitate, resurrect, return to, repeat, re-incarnate and rehabilitate the Labour Party as the true expression of the working class.

With only 170,000 or so members left and most of its organisation in meltdown, with constituencies and wards open to re-entryism, the Labour Party is ripe for another round of plunder by the virtuous and 'socialist'. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, as usual the dream will star key figures rejected by their unions over a long period of time. Tomorrow's great socialist MPs are today's politely unwanted trade union has-beens.

We have a dangerous and volatile new version of the old siren song developing. It says that the Labour Party must lead us to the Promised Land through unity of the 'Left' and Parliament. In effect, it says that what workers have rejected in their millions must be reinjected by those they have ejected; Old New Labour will be replaced by a new generation of New Old Labour!

Enough. This government must go and workers who reject all that Parliament stands for must step forward.

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Workers shake Bolivia

THE BOLIVIAN PEOPLE have overthrown the 'butcher' president 'Goni' Gonzalo Sanchez Lozada. He resigned at the end of a month-long struggle which grew in strength despite extensive military suppression which took 77 lives and left over 400 injured.

The president announced his resignation in a TV broadcast on the evening of Friday 17th October in La Paz. The Bolivian Congress will now meet to create a new government. He resigned whilst demonstrations against him filled most of the centre of La Paz and many other cities and towns throughout the country. Demonstrators had blocked roads, and a general strike that began on Monday 13th closed down all activities. Food was running short in the cities.

Having failed to suppress opposition, Goni had offered to withdraw his proposals on Bolivian natural gas which had sparked the protest. His government's plan had been to export gas to the US at a much lower price than the current exports to Brazil and made no provision for setting up gas distribution within Bolivia.

As a last ditch bid to stay in power the president proposed a referendum on the gas project, reform of energy laws and constitutional changes, but the people held firm and demanded his exit. Union leader Jaime Solares expressed the general feeling 'let him not just leave the government but Bolivia as well and may he take the US ambassador with him'.

Hours before the resignation the government fell apart when Goni's main coalition partner, Manfred Reyes Villa, leader of the centre right New Republican Force, called on him to go. Reyes said he asked the president to go to avoid more bloodshed, but was clearly jumping a sinking ship. The government had a very weak mandate with only 22% of the vote and a coalition of opportunists. The main opposition party in congress, Movement for Socialism, is relatively new and has much support amongst indigenous Bolivians.

Although the opposition had started with trade union protests and road blockages by farmers, it grew in extent and breadth. At the demonstrations trade unionists, farmers, miners, teachers, health workers, self-employed producers, neighbourhood organisations, church groups and many others united in their demand that the treacherous government and its butcher president leave. The Bolivian TUC, Central Obrera Boliviana, played a leading role in the struggle.

Last year after mass protests a tax imposed on the orders of the IMF was withdrawn but the government soon attacked again. This time, compromising with a president with peoples' blood on his hands was not an option, the people had learnt from their experience of this government.

SHIPBUILDING

Occupation at Appledore

WORKERS AT Appledore Shipbuilders in North Devon have occupied their yard in a fight to save 550 jobs. The company has been put into the hands of receivers and the yard is up for sale.

The receivers have been allowed in so that the workers can access benefits and statutory redundancy money, but the workers are still in control of the yard.

Tragically, the apprentices at Appledore have also been dismissed but they have returned to work even though they are not being paid. They are being taught by some of the former workforce who likewise are getting no money.

The unions are seeking an urgent meeting with the receivers to see what can be done to save jobs.

MANUFACTURE

Union on the march

AMICUS, the trade union representing manufacturing workers, has called for a Minister of Industry to be appointed to ensure that industry is given focus in the coming years. But with the government's previous record on engineering and manufacturing this may get watered down to a mere initiative through the Department for Trade and Industry.

The call came at the end of a demonstration by Amicus members outside the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth. There was much clapping from onlookers, and those involved felt pleased finally to have organised something national over manufacturing after two decades of torpor.

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

CONTRACTING

Jarvis jumps the rails

JARVIS has pulled out of its contracts to maintain the railways in three areas, including the East Coast Main Line. The staff will transfer to Network Rail early in 2004, with the work being done in house.

This follows a recent derailment of an express passenger train as it left London's King's Cross station, where Jarvis apparently repeated errors that had led to another derailment near Rotherham.

The rail unions have welcomed the fact that nearly half of all rail maintenance will now be done by staff directly employed by Network Rail. They say using contractors is more expensive and undermines safety.

Jarvis says it was a commercial decision. Its reputation is in tatters after a string of incidents, and it is finding it hard to win non-rail contracts. Network Rail is putting a different spin on things, saying that Jarvis "jumped before they were pushed".

Both versions are probably true. Jarvis came into maintenance when it was highly lucrative, but Network Rail has put a stop to this particular gravy train.

Jarvis calculates that it can make more money from government-inspired local authority and other public service contracts on offer, although it has also been forced to withdraw from Southwark education services. Its share price rocketed after it announced its withdrawal from rail maintenance.

EDUCATION

Anger over unqualified support

TEACHERS in a Lancashire school where support staff — "learning managers" — are being used for periods of up to 10 days to cover for absent teachers have voted to take industrial action to force the school to employ qualified teachers.

The headteacher of the Radclyffe school, in Oldham, has said that the learning managers will not teach classes, but distribute work set by teachers and supervise pupils while they complete the work. But the supervision role has alarmed the NUT and its members at Radclyffe. They say that each child is entitled to be taught by a qualified teacher.

NUT members at the school have voted not to set or mark work for pupils supervised by learning managers. The NUT wants the school to permanently employ qualified teachers to cover classes (this has already been implemented at another school in Oldham), or employ supply teachers to work with the support staff.



Photo: Workers

Postal workers on the picket line at the Royal Mail Delivery Office in Leyton, north east London, on Thursday 16 October. members of the Communication Workers Union were staging a second one-day strike in their dispute over London Allowances for postal workers.

Merger hits pensions scheme

A MERGER of two major polymer (rubber) processing companies in Britain has triggered a pensions crisis for the workers involved. In yet another move in the relentless rationalisation of this industry, Trelleborg (14 sites in Britain) and the Polymer Sealing Solutions (PSS) division of Smiths Industries (10 sites in Britain) became one entity on 1 October. Trelleborg is a company listed on the Swedish stock exchange and the purchase of the PSS will take its global workforce to 21,000, operating in 40 countries.

Trelleborg does not operate an occupational pension scheme but has purchased a company which does, and what is more has a pension fund with a healthy surplus. On 6 October Trelleborg announced a proposal to offer a new 'money purchase' scheme to PSS employees, in line with the general trend of companies to take the first opportunity to ditch final salary schemes.

A six-month consultation period is planned, and PSS employees intend to ensure representation on the board of the new pensions company.

Meanwhile, the remaining workers in Smiths Group were recently told they would have to double their contributions and see a halving of any payouts — this after the company had been on a long-term pensions holiday.

In a complex pension set-up due to the countless mergers and acquisitions, the workers in the original Smiths Group pension scheme are faced with an impossible situation — a fund in deficit and the loss to Trelleborg of a separate section of the pension scheme (the PSS section) which had propped up the whole combined fund.

Smiths Group workers representatives have threatened to walk out if the company fails to come up with a better set of proposals.

POST OFFICE

Walkout over racist comments

WOLVERHAMPTON postal workers walked out from the sorting depot last month in protest at anonymous racist comments placed on the staff notice board. Like all messages for the board, it had been vetted by management, but they only edited the swear words not the racist comments.

The all-out strike by the 120 workers at the depot on Friday 10 October closed

the depot completely and was followed by a demonstration outside by all the workers.

After apologies from Elmar Toine, the deputy chief of Royal Mail, the following Monday, the workers returned to work and attended a meeting with their representatives to hear the management's explanation.

They walked out again because the apology was not followed by any plan of action to deal with the offence. They returned to work in a united disciplined manner when satisfied that the matter would be dealt with seriously.

Schools rocked by budget cuts

A UNIVERSITY OF Liverpool report published last month confirms that this year's budget deficit in schools, dismissed by the government as insignificant, is in fact worse than thought. The report is a direct challenge to Blair and his education department, which claims that the number of "loser" schools is a minority. It concludes that between 14,000 and 15,000 of the country's state schools had a budget cut. As a consequence, some 8,800 teaching jobs and over 12,000 support staff are estimated to be lost.

True, some expanding schools are taking on additional staff, but the net reduction in teachers' jobs is around 4,500. Blair's assertion that 10,000 extra teachers would be employed in Labour's second term is looking sick.

Additionally, the report points to the fact that, despite extra funding in the next two years, schools would struggle to avoid further redundancies. And almost half of secondary schools said more classes would be taken by teachers not trained in the relevant subject.

The authors of the report, Professor Alan Smithies and Dr Pamela Robinson, said, "The consequences for the majority of schools have been disastrous." Half of secondary schools and one in five primaries report increased class sizes.

Not yet a crisis, but the warning signs are there. This government is beginning to renege on its commitment to education in this country. They want the money for other purposes. At the same time as they export our money and resources to Iraq, (ironically bringing their education system to its knees in the process), they compromise the quality we expect of our own schools with a strategy of underfunding.

The unions in education are much exercised at the moment, largely at national level, by what divides them. A greater appreciation of the real problems teachers face, and their common enemy, could yet prove the catalyst for unity, a prerequisite for progress.

UNIVERSITIES

Decision time over agreement

UNIVERSITIES WANT to restructure pay for their 300,000 workers, with greater emphasis on local bargaining. Five of the seven unions involved are likely to accept the deal, but two — representing the lecturers — have yet to be convinced.

The employers, represented by Universities UK, want a single pay spine and a two-year deal to cover the period of assimilation. They claim that the agreement proposed in July will modernise pay arrangements and help cope with public sector spending cuts.

Unions representing non-teaching staff have mainly welcomed the deal, and will accept it. But lecturers will be balloted, some for rejection and strike action, others with a qualified recommendation in favour.

The Association of University Teachers, whose members mainly work in the old universities, opposes the agreement. It fears that the new system will undermine national pay rates, with pay determined by where people work rather than what they do.

The AUT also says that the assimilation terms — just under 7% over two years — will be barely above inflation. That's not enough to persuade them to agree to a new system. It does nothing to respond to their long-term claims to catch

up with outside pay and to shorten scales. They are frustrated, too, by the long drawn-out negotiations.

Employers point to the greater amounts that lower-paid workers will get under the deal. They accuse the AUT of being the threat to national bargaining, which they say will break up if the deal is not accepted.

Natfhe, largely based in the former polytechnics, is the other union holding a ballot. Its members have doubts about the changes to their pay, and they share some of the AUT's concerns about restructuring.

Many other public sector workers have faced so-called pay modernisation since the government was re-elected. Few have found it worthwhile, although Natfhe members in further education colleges faced with similar proposals eventually accepted them.

Natfhe held a special delegates' meeting on 18 October, and decided to ballot with a recommendation to accept the new framework as the best deal that could be negotiated.

Acceptance is subject to reaching agreement with employers on five outstanding points. These include a safety net if inflation increases, and agreed guidance on job evaluation. The result will be known by early November. The employers have said that they believe they can work on Natfhe's issues, but claim they do not know what the union wants.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

NOVEMBER

Friday 7 November, 9.30 to 4.00

Rally for a Referendum, General Assembly Room, Church House, Dean's Yard, Westminster

This event will bring together individuals and groups from across the political spectrum who are campaigning for a referendum on the EU Constitutional

LETTER

Rail maintenance

Dear Editor

Your article entitled "Rail: Where's the maintenance?" in the June issue seemed to portray a bleak picture.

Well, it is true that those of us using the railways since the creation of Network Rail have seen more delays and cancellations due to the strict adherence to safety procedures with no compromises given to the train operators. Of course the jokes about the wrong sunshine shone well during August. But there are also management issues within the train operating companies as well.

There is a strategy to tighten the level of control of track maintenance and a recruitment drive to draw in to the rail industry engineers from other sectors of industry. This programme is entitled the "Track Engineering Conversion Programme". This programme is set to last for many years. It is also planned that the new engineers will help design better equipment.

During the next five years the urgent maintenance required to the track and signalling may increase the disruption. To question whether this is acceptable is tantamount to condoning the lack of investment in the 1980s and 1990s.

There is a will /desire of the workers within the industry to correct the situation.

The reasons for the constantly spirally costs are complex. But at the heart of this problem is a lack of investment to fund the vision to create a railway Britain wants. The Strategic Rail Authority has been criticised and the government has distanced itself.

Some funds have been made available to Network Rail but it is likely that they will need much more. When other rail networks in Europe are compared to ours it seems glaringly obvious that some sections of the infrastructure need replacing.

Sometimes visions and correct solutions need to be bridged to the reality of the time.

Reader

School Meals

IF YOU CAN'T kick a dog, kick a school meals worker. School meals are often criticised for being of poor quality, made on the cheap for profit. Much of the criticism is ill informed, like that of the Soil Association, whose spokesman recently compared the cost of a school meal with a prison meal (adults' portions!) Hardly comparing like with like.

In fact the quality of school meals, certainly for children of primary school age, is closely regulated. Nutrition standards have to meet government guidelines, which mean that chips can only be served once a week, for example. Safety standards, while set locally, have to be met by temperature control and sampling.

Price

The price of the meals is laid down by local councils, and varies, somewhere around the £1.50 mark in Southeast England, for example. Where the service has been contracted out, it is not subsidised, contrary to popular belief. Instead it has to provide a profit both for the local council and for the contractor. This is not actually a business in which it is easy to make a quick buck. How many cafes or restaurants can turn out a nutritional meal for less than £1.50?

In addition, within the price constraints and rules on nutrition and safety, the school meals service has to see that the food will attract the young customers. Otherwise the company or in-house service provider may well lose the contract.

Misconception

Another common misconception is that the abysmal pay and conditions endured by the cooks and kitchen assistants have been imposed by private contractors. In fact it mainly happened when councils brought in Compulsory Competitive Tendering during the Thatcher era.

CCT was in theory supposed to get rid of unnecessary middle management, but councils often found it easier to attack the frontline workforce, by abolishing their National Joint Council pay and conditions. This was often done in the name of keeping the service in-house, against some real or imagined cheap bid by some "demon" private contractor.

There is no doubt that school meals staffs, far more than those they feed, have a raw deal. Although most of them are driven by their own version of the so-called public service ethic to do a good job despite poverty wages, they are hardly recognised as public service workers. Within the unions they are largely ignored, though many are members, and most have to negotiate local agreements on pay.

When strikes by any of the teaching or local government unions affect schools, as in the recent London weighting strike, they are locked out and lose their little pay without benefiting from any gains which might be won. This, plus the infantile poaching activities of the unions involved in local government, could be a recipe for anti-unionism among these workers. It is time to stop ignoring, or merely wooing, the school meals service. Have a little respect.

Recently statisticians have been their handiwork...

Statistics: in the new

STATISTICIANS EXPECT their statistics to be newsworthy but — like government press officers — it is a cause for worry if the statisticians are themselves newsworthy. They are workers with a specific skill who, like other professionals, are content to let the products of their labours speak for themselves.

In September it became known that Eurostat — the Statistical Office of the European Union, based in Luxembourg — had been engaged in what THE TIMES of 26 September, in over a page of broadsheet detail, called "double accounting, inflated contracts, nepotism and slush funds" for the past 13 years, and that this pattern of crooked behaviour went right to the top, to the office of the Director General, Yves Franchet, who was removed from his post earlier this year.

Eurostat is at the heart of EU politicking. It was the source of all the figures on the basis of which the single currency was established and is now responsible for producing figures used to evaluate its success. In particular it monitors compliance to the Stability and Growth Pact, which binds the euro countries and is now being so brazenly flouted by France and Germany.

Eurostat has a budget of over £80 million and a staff of 700 but is dependent for all its information on figures released from the separate national statistical organisations — in Britain the Office of National Statistics.

Slush funds

The culture of slush funds throughout the EU institutions has a long history. Of Eurostat's staff, 120 are seconded from member countries and have traditionally received a double salary — one from their home country and one from Eurostat — as well as free boarding-school education for their children.

Eurostat has clearly been fiddling its finances but has it been fiddling the statistics? "Double accounting" is not the same as "double counting", but the temptation to distort its counts is undoubtedly there.

One of the main activities of the EU is to collect money from its member states and redistribute it in the form of "funds" under various titles to what it regards as the more deserving of these member states. Indeed, this is partly what makes the EU attractive to its new members.

And how does it decide who should get the money? Why, by consulting the statistics as supplied by the member states. And how can we be sure that the member states are scrupulously honest about the figures they submit? Because Eurostat checks them!

Headlines

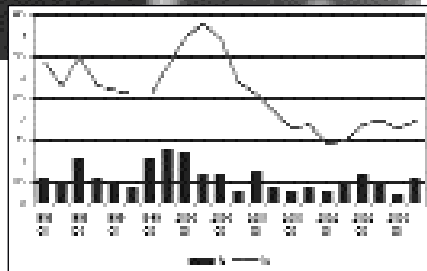
Also in September ONS itself hit the headlines. There was no suggestion of financial impropriety but questions were raised about the quality of current British statistics. How valid were these questions, and do they point to a failure in ONS or in other parts of government?

Some of the statistics produced by ONS are based on counts made directly by ONS staff through Registry Offices, the Population Census and various social surveys. Others are based on figures produced by government departments and

n in the limelight, usurping the position rightfully occupied by /s on their own account



Above: Yves Franchet, who had to quit his post as Director-General of Eurostat following the revelation of 13 years of financial irregularity.
Right: Britain's GDP numbers, focus of another scandal



agencies as part of their administrative procedures. An example of the latter is the complex measure known as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — an estimate of the size of the economy, which is produced for each quarter in the year almost immediately after the end of the quarter, with a revised version being produced somewhat later when further checking has been done.

Shock

The shock news in September was that the original estimate for the second quarter of 2003 had been wrong: the growth in GDP compared with the second quarter of 2002 was 0.6% instead of 0.3%. (Some commentators have described this as a 100% error, others as a 50% error, yet others as a 0.3% error — all correct descriptions but giving rather different impressions in a headline.)

The reason for the change was that the Department of Trade and Industry had under-reported construction output. Whether the ONS statisticians should have instantly spotted the error in data

'The shock news in September was that the original estimate for the second quarter of 2003 had been wrong'

they had not generated themselves is open to question but their revision of the figure apparently "stunned the City" and may lead to an increase in the interest rate in November.

The GDP issue opened the floodgates, and very soon a catalogue of ONS "errors" was produced. The census was said to have underestimated population growth — very true, the Census is a fairly blunt instrument, but the only reliable source of census errors is a series of quality checks carried out by ONS itself that will have provided most of the

evidence for the census figure being too low. Imports, it was said, had been underestimated because of massive fraud in the IT market — true again but it is difficult to get accurate figures on illegal activity (an interviewer who knocks on a person's door and asks what jobs he did for pay or profit last week is unlikely to be told about the bank job he did on Saturday night).

The government's £23 billion bail-out of Network Rail was alleged to have been "wrongly classified as government debt". But ONS should not be responsible for deciding what to call it — only for ensuring that the figure is correct and that it is made public.

That said, there undoubtedly are areas in which ONS could improve its performance. Statisticians check and re-check the figures that they produce and insist that those figures should be published; this is the essence of their professionalism.

Pressures

But they work against time pressures that often mean enough checking simply can't be done, and in an environment of cuts in which the resources to do a thoroughly professional job may be denied them. Reports of a double counting of pension contributions and of surprising month-to-month fluctuations in figures on retail sales illustrate these limitations.

In October it was announced that Len Cook, the fairly new head of the ONS, was to be hauled before the Commons Treasury subcommittee. A startled nation learned that his title is the National Statistician and that he is also to have to answer to yet another government watchdog, the Statistics Commission, a group of academics whose job is to police official statistics on behalf of the Treasury. He should not have much difficulty before either body.

British official statistics are in the hands of a pretty capable section of the working class and untainted by the maladies afflicting Eurostat.

But the Fat Controllers from the Treasury will surely tell him that in future he is to put in nothing less than a 110% effort.

With global public spending on education exceeding \$1,000 billion service into a wellspring of private profit...

What price education?



Listen closely: he's talking about the end of state education

WHAT IS the Labour Party really saying about education? It's worth listening closely. Take Blair at the Labour Party Conference:

"And how is it fair that well off parents, for all our improvements, who can't get their child into a decent secondary school, can choose to buy a good education but poor parents can't? Choice has always been there for the well off. Excellence has always been at the service of the wealthy. What is unfair is not the right to choose, not the pursuit of excellence but where that choice and that excellence depends on your wealth not your need."

What Blair is almost certainly advocating is a system of state-funded vouchers for parents which schools then compete for, forcing them to act as competitive education businesses.

The Tories have a similar idea, with their Better Schools passports. As the Tory Shadow Education Secretary, Damian Green explains, "It will offer a radical extension of school choice. It will allow all children to aspire to an excellent education."

Is it far-fetched to suggest Blair is about to undermine state comprehensive

education with such a voucher system? It's interesting to note that Andrew Adonis, Blair's education policy adviser, recently organised a visit for some prominent education journalists to Milwaukee, home of the most developed system of education vouchers in the USA. A 'leak' from No. 10 has implied that opposition to vouchers by DfES officials will be overcome and Adonis is "strongly pressing" Blair to introduce the scheme.

Labour-Tory unity

It's not just vouchers that unite Blair and the Tories in education policy. Blair recently visited a new Academy in Thamesmead, which cost £31 million and services a poor estate, where truancy is rife and the old school was 'failing'. It is run by a private company and financed by private and public funds with a state subsidy taken from our education budget. The 'failing' school was starved of the investment the Academy attracted.

Blair talks of "breaking down barriers that hold people back", but has yet to deal with the under-resourcing, shortage of qualified teachers and general demoralisation in the state sector.

Blair went on to promise, "At secondary school, personalised learning for every child in new Specialist Schools and City Academies." What Blair seeks to break down are state comprehensive schools, and Local Education Authorities, under the guise of promising "change and choice", implying, as Charles Clarke did in a recent speech, that only in specialist schools can all pupils have "quality education" which "raises standards for every individual pupil".

The Tories are equally clear, suggesting both the expansion of religious schools and of schools which specialise in vocational education, as well as "one other type of school I [Damian Green] am very confident parents will want. The sort of school where academic children from any background, rich or poor, are given a chance to stretch themselves."

Marginalise

To summarise, the Tories want to see an increasing number of schools provided by the private and voluntary sector. They want to marginalise LEAs still further (and there is not much further to go). They want to see selective specialist schools — returning to secondary modern, technical school and grammar school education. Parents would buy into this system with vouchers or 'passports'.

This would clearly mean an end to a planned system of state education, and the development of a patchwork of education businesses competing for private funding, fees and 'voucher money'. The immediate effect would be a further transfer of public funds into the private sector — but perhaps the Tories are not too averse to that.

Under Labour's legislation if a new school is to be built, LEAs have to seek bids from the private sector to build, own and run it. The Private Finance Initiative leads to state school buildings and non-teaching employees being the source of profit for private sector companies.

LEAs are being marginalised in strategy, function, management and budget terms. Forced 'outsourcing' of LEA services and functions to the private sector

ion a year, there are enormous pressures to transform it from a

is increasingly common. Labour promotes specialist schools that seek private funding, and receive additional state funding conditional on that private investment, thus elevating their resourcing above what Alistair Campbell referred to as 'bog-standard' comprehensives.

And of course specialist schools have the right to introduce an element of selection on the basis of 'aptitude'. And then there's the Labour policy of developing different 'vocational and academic pathways' in secondary education. Won't selection for these 'pathways' together with the development of specialist schools, lead directly to the Tory ideal of separate schools for the 'academic' and 'vocational' child?

Labour's promotion of city academies moves the control of education into better funded privately run schools. Their continued promotion of 'faith schools' is also resulting in yet more fragmentation — and, as a direct consequence, the segregation of pupils not just on religious but ethnic lines. Now the picture is just about complete with the Blairite support for vouchers coming out of the closet.

Reversal?

Is this all a matter of Blair having overcome Labour's commitment to state comprehensive education? Could it be reversed as a result of a determined struggle in the Labour Party — perhaps part of a wider agenda to "Reclaim The Party" (see *First Thoughts*, p2)? This is just an irrelevant sideshow. There are more powerful influences at play than Blair and his circle.

Remember Blair's victory oration at the 1997 TUC a few months after his election, in which he described the "essential challenges of modernisation". The first, he said with enthusiasm, was "to create an economy fully attuned to a new global market. The second is to fashion a modern welfare state where the role of government changes so it is not necessary to provide all social provision." The process of the globalisation of capital, he said, "is irresistible and irreversible". What are these "irresistible and irreversible"

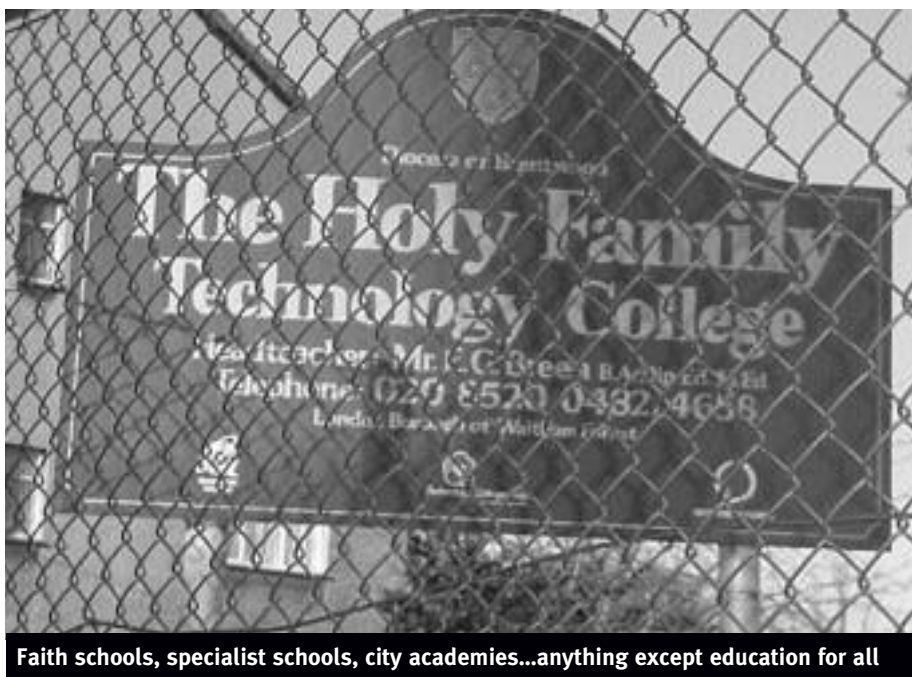


Photo: Workers

pressures?

Britain signed up to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1994/5. GATS is the mechanism being used to further the privatisation of education. The WTO states, "GATS is the first ever set of multilateral, legally enforceable rules covering the international trade in services." It makes it compulsory to open up nations' services (they list 160 such services, including education) to international trade — that is to the transnationals.

Given that such services account for almost two-thirds of activity in the industrialised economies it was inevitable that the WTO would see potential ownership of these services by transnationals as a priority.

And behind the WTO sit the United States and the European Union, each determined to destroy national barriers (in the case of the United States, all those except its own). It is a UN body, and its policies come from and are agreed by individual countries. Britain could work with other countries to block the WTO's destructive policies, but of course it is precisely the politics of Thatcher and Blair

that have been responsible for driving forward globalisation, in Britain, in the EU and at the WTO.

Dream market

Global public spending on education alone exceeds \$1,000 billion, and covers the employment of 50 million teachers, and the education of a billion students in hundreds of thousands of educational establishments. As Education International (the international organisation of education unions) points out, "Some see this immense bloc as a 'dream market' for future investment." And obviously for immense profit.

And so a 'General Agreement', legally enforceable against any signatory national government attempting to resist it, became necessary to open this market up — not just in education, but in all services from health provision to water supply and prisons, from transport to telecommunications and postal services.

But excluded from GATS regulations are services which are "provided under government authority and without a

Continued on page 10

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commercial purpose". The British government's original public position was that "the UK is not prepared to make commitments which call the NHS or State Education into question".

But the WTO interprets the exclusion of services to be limited to those, "completely financed and administered by the state and moreover, not having any commercial purposes." Throughout WTO documents they refer to "the education market" rather than to the education service.

This increasingly gave the green light

for governments of the industrialised world to restructure their services, and notably education, in order that any exemption from GATS would be out of the question. Now with successive Tory and Labour governments' programmes of private sector involvement it is increasingly difficult to argue that our education system is "completely financed and administered by the state" or that it has "no commercial purpose".

Pressure

It is the economic and political pressure of globalised capital that is driving the education agenda — with Blair its willing

vehicle. Perhaps it is now clear what he meant with his 1997 commitment (three years after Britain signed up to GATS) to "fashion a modern welfare state where the role of government changes so it is not necessary to provide all social provision" in order to "create an economy fully attuned to a new global market".

Blair is not the architect of privatisation — the concept pre-dates him, and anyway would require thought and planning on a much more impressive scale than he could muster. But his is a consciously Quisling government, handing over our national life to the multinationals and their international political and economic

The private finance initiative in education:

THE LAST FEW weeks have been difficult for supporters of privatisation, with the latest debacle being the high profile case of Jarvis pulling out of its contract to maintain the rail network. (This is the same Jarvis who was invited in and paid by the DfES to "disseminate good practice" among local education authorities on improving examination results.)

Since its inception in the Thatcher years, through to its enthusiastic implementation under Blair, the privatisation agenda has moved from selling-off public utilities into areas such as education and health. As a central plank in EU policy, it finds favour with social democrats, who see it as part of a 'modernising agenda'.

So, what is wrong with PFI?

The case against is set out succinctly in *WHAT IS WRONG WITH PFI IN SCHOOLS*, a recent report published by UNISON*.

Many workers do not feel the impact of a 'build and maintain' PFI contract until after the building stage is complete. Maintaining a school (or a hospital) often leads to job losses and a drop in the pay and conditions of workers.

This may not happen at once because of transfer clauses written into workers' contracts. But as the private companies running the show increase their control, contracts can be re-negotiated and conditions become worse. In particular, a two-tier workforce may be produced, as new recruits are forced to join under a new contract offering worse conditions.

Ironically, the seeds for this attack on

pay and conditions can be found over a decade ago in the forced transfer of funds to schools and the deregulation of services such as cleaning and maintenance. Many local authorities used this deregulation to attack its workforce and did little to take on the government. The fruits of this attack can be seen now as the fragmentation and weakening of public sector control over a wide range of its activity.

Victory

A short-term victory was won in March 2003 when the government was forced to recognise the problem and inserted a clause for new PFI contracts which states, "Contractors who intend to cut costs by driving down the terms and conditions for staff, whether for transferees or for new joiners taken on to work beside them, will not provide the best value and will not be selected to provide services for the Council." Since many PFI contracts are to run for 25-30 years there is plenty of scope for the company to maintain pay and conditions in the short term and change them later.

PFI forces up costs and leads to pressure on design and quality of service. The Audit Commission has found that many PFI contracts fail to meet the specifications set for them and fall far short of the spin presented by government. Examples from the Audit Office include:

- the quality of PFI schools is not as good as schools built by more traditional

means

- the best examples of innovation came from traditional schools
- costs of cleaning and caretaking were higher in PFI schools
- new-build PFI schools were not completed more quickly.

The Audit Commission's concerns are echoed by the government's own architectural watchdog, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). Its head, Sir Stuart Lipton, has said that, "There has been a general under-performance in terms of functionality, build quality and aesthetics."

There are many examples of poor design and build cited in the UNISON booklet, but two in Scotland are typical and worrying. In one case, 29 schools in Glasgow, built and refurbished under a PFI project, have defects, with such poor ventilation that some children have fainted because of over-heating. In another, in Renfrewshire, a PFI school for 800 pupils was such a safety hazard a roof collapsed in a teaching area and the LEA had to step in and make repairs. The contractor, Jarvis, failed to respond.

When the Audit Commission and the government's own watchdog line up to castigate the state of PFI contracts in schools, we know that those with political motives driving the show are not listening. The losers will be workers and their children — the companies can walk away if the profits dry up or problems arise.

PFI is being used to bail out private

'Blair's is a consciously Quisling government, handing over our national life to the multinationals'

structures.

As Education International put it three years ago, "In the wake of other major public services which have been subject to extensive privatisation and deregulation, public education is increasingly being

targeted by predatory and powerful entrepreneurial interests. The latter are aiming at nothing less than its dismantling by subjecting it to international competition."

As one advocate of privatisation, James Tooley of Newcastle University, puts it, "The way forward is to bring in (to education) the incentives of the private sector that push forward quality and innovation in all other areas of our lives. Education is too important to be excluded from the virtues of the profit motive."

Presumably, "the quality and innovation in all other areas of our lives" are those we dwell on while waiting for our

privatised trains.

The process of privatisation in education in the USA has accelerated at a rate that leaves educationalists and their unions struggling to keep up. As Michael Milken, a US finance capitalist put it very directly and simply to Arthur Levine, the President of Teachers' College, Columbia: "You guys are in trouble' and we're gonna eat your lunch."

"Irresistible and irreversible"? Not at all. Their problem is that they rely on workers to run the education system. And education workers can exert their own huge strength in the opposite direction. If they choose to.

it's ours to put a stop to

thePFI.net

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companies and to bolster profits. An examination of the annual reports filed by companies, shows that the opportunities offered by PFI are a key source of future expansion and income.

Projects are being sold to shareholders because of their guaranteed income stream, their stability and their

high returns on capital. From a worker's perspective this amounts to theft. For example, Tower Hamlets LEA was forced to go back to the government for £19.5 million more to support a PFI project. Why? Because once the successful consortium became the sole 'preferred bidder', they raised the bid price from £40

million to £55 million.

Other examples show companies which keep their bids down by omitting or forgetting vital components in the hope that the vast and complex paperwork will hide things. Jarvis (again) managed to forget the cost of furniture and equipment from a contract with Haringey – the £2 million eventual shortfall was picked up by cuts in other services. In Sheffield, cabling was not specified in the contract and the LEA has had to find £50,000 to cover it.

Two things are stopping local authorities taking control and being able to build and run schools with local labour.

European Union

The first is the driving force behind the whole scheme – the EU. Indeed the European Investment Bank is one of the biggest sources of debt finance for PFI projects in Britain – it has committed over £1 billion over the past five years to support PFI companies.

The second, and the most important, is British workers. If we sit idly by, then more and more control will be taken away and we will be left fighting rearguard battles to save jobs or protect the quality of design and build. We need to understand the severity of the attack. It was easy to see Thatcher and her confrontation with workers – the current enemy is much more cunning, but just as deadly.

***WHAT IS WRONG WITH PFI IN SCHOOLS, is available from UNISON directly or from www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/13672.pdf**

“It is in pursuit of high standards, greater local accountability, genuine provision to tackle health inequalities that we are bringing forward health secretary said. Where does the truth lie?”

Health: getting to the bottom of foundation

LAST MONTH the government announced in the House of Lords that the second tranche of 32 three star NHS Trusts have completed the first stage in applying to become NHS Foundation Trusts.

Lord Warner, for the government, had as expected some very fine, positive remarks:

“We are now working with over 50 NHS Trusts moving towards NHS Foundation Trust status and this clearly demonstrates a growing commitment to, and enthusiasm for, NHS Foundation Trusts across the NHS. If all these were successful, it is likely that over 25% of the population in England would have access to NHS Foundation Trusts by the end of 2004.”

The first tranche of 25 NHS Trusts in are currently in the process of consulting with their local communities before reaching the final stage of the application process in December 2003.

Fine words

Fine words also from the Secretary of State for Health in December 2002 committed the government to a new model of NHS provision:

“It is in pursuit of high standards, greater local accountability, genuine public ownership, greater emphasis on local service provision to tackle health inequalities that we are bringing forward proposals for NHS Foundation Trusts. NHS Foundation Trusts will be part of the NHS, and subject to NHS systems of inspection. They will treat NHS patients according to NHS principles and NHS standards, but they will be controlled and run locally, not nationally.

“We will shortly be bringing forward legislation to establish NHS Foundation Trusts as independent public interest organisations, modelled on co-operative societies and mutual organisations. Their ownership will be lodged in the local communities they serve. This form of social ownership will replace central state ownership with local ownership. They will be true to our traditions — of solidarity, community and fairness — but right for our times with power in the hands of local people and frontline NHS staff. Local



Status seeker: Homerton Hospital, London, expects to be in the first wave

Photo: Workers

people will elect their representatives to serve on the NHS Foundation Trust’s Board of Governors. They will have an absolute majority. Staff from the NHS Foundation Trust — alongside local stakeholders and Primary Care Trusts — will be represented.”

He also said there would be a legal block on their assets to protect the NHS from privatisation, or the distribution of profit or dividends. Their purpose would remain the treatment of NHS patients.

Opposition: national provision?

Despite the fine words, there has been a groundswell of opposition to the whole concept, not least from within the Labour Party and trade unions. This seems to be in part rooted in a resistance to any sort of national variation in provision.

Since the government introduced the “star” system for performance the whole issue of an NHS with consistent service and equal treatment of people’s health care needs has been exposed.

One can argue about how meaningful are the figures. Are they real or “managed”? Are they fair, or have some

areas been less well resourced, limiting achievement? Does everyone have the same constraints, such as recruitment problems, environmental conditions, patient load, historical backlog of infrastructure problems...even just geography? Comparisons are invidious and no one is comfortable with them if there are difficulties on their patch.

Opposition: leaching resources

One of the arguments offered is that NHS resources will be siphoned off towards the “best”, at the expense of the rest. This is where local accountability is key. If a foundation trust invests in developments that affect its running costs it will have to apply to its Primary Care Trust, supposedly accountable. They can borrow the capital now, but how do they repay?

NHS funding now flows from the government down to PCTs. These trusts are managed by GPs mainly with other healthcare staff input and some management expertise. They are responsible for contracting, or commissioning, care for their patients.

genuine public ownership, greater emphasis on local service and proposals for NHS Foundation Trusts.” That’s what the

n hospitals

Some care is via the hospitals; most is out in the community. It is for them to decide how much funding to direct at hospital trusts. If they are not part of the planning for new developments then they can refuse to fund them. But will they feel able to refuse — or will they feel political pressure to support Foundation Trust initiatives?

On the other hand, objectively, if the Foundation Trust has passed the criteria for attaining Foundation status this should be because they have performed well in the past. Their clinical work, ideas and overall management are judged to be sound. They should be a good risk for investing public money in a modern world. But sadly theory and practice often take separate courses, so all are not convinced.

Whitehall freedoms?

What about this idea of freedom from Whitehall? Will a lack of central control mean such disparity in provision that patients will not have the required access to the NHS? Again, from the Secretary of State...

“For the first time since 1948 the NHS

What the government says

- NHS foundation trusts to be free from control by Whitehall, and accountable instead to locally elected bodies
- Foundation trusts to be free to work towards meeting local needs and priorities within the NHS framework of standards and inspection. As employers, they will be free to make flexible arrangements on rewards and incentives
- NHS foundation trusts will be free to innovate in asset use, retaining surpluses to invest in new services. They will have a wider range of options for capital funding
- Governance of the foundation trusts to suit local circumstances within a legislative framework.

will begin to move away from a monolithic centralised system towards greater local accountability and greater local control. Reform cannot be achieved by holding on to the monolithic centralised structures of the 1940s. We cannot reform by looking backwards. We need to look forwards. Reform means investing not just extra resources in frontline services, but power and trust in those frontline services.”

Scepticism and cynicism abound in the listener! We love the centrally controlled NHS we have had since the 1940s. This proposal seems radical, and will it be real? The government’s stated intention is to require all NHS provision to meet central targets and standards, but with local control.

Unfortunately it seems this is only part of the story. Underfunding is a significant issue which is relevant to any future NHS. Certainly the government has committed huge additional resources over the last few years, and promises more. But it will require substantial further investment to achieve their agenda. It is clearly the case that shortage of money presents managers with extra responsibility for efficient use of the cash they have got. But whether the ‘freedoms’ of Foundation Trusts will clear away some of the treacle from daily working processes that hinder the NHS remains to be seen.

Pay and staff rewards

“They will be able to recruit and employ their own staff, with flexibility to offer new rewards and incentives.” This is unpopular with trade unions. It sits poorly with Agenda for Change, the NHS rethink on terms and conditions for all staff (except medical staff and senior management). National pay bargaining has always been hotly defended. Such a centralised arrangement sought to protect the weaker elements by bargaining with best practice arguments that all could benefit from. But it is conceivable that this Foundation Trust flexibility could be used as a lever for others, that Foundation Trust terms and conditions will offer some leadership that others can build on.

In any case higher pay in the

‘As for staff terms and conditions, it is up to us to make this work for us...’

foundation trusts is probably mostly pie in the sky. They will get their funds from PCTs, who will not have money to pay more than the national rate.

Staff and organisations are concerned about change. Change should be clear in terms of benefits before we engage with it. Here it is apparent that the government has no great clarity but some woolly ideas about the potential benefits of freedoms from Whitehall. They seem to have planned to release the shackles to see what trusts performing well can come up with to improve the health service. Is this good enough, or is it extremely risky? Probably it would need very careful monitoring of the impact, but that seems to be the opposite of Whitehall’s intent.

Barrier

There is a real legal barrier that protects the NHS from being stripped of its assets, allegedly. This needs to be explored, and the public need to know that it cannot be removed, and will work. The private sector, as we know, is very clever when it comes to seizing an opportunity.

As for staff terms and conditions, it is up to us to make this work for us, in spite of Agenda for Change, which is a farce at the moment. Foundation trusts are expected to be the first to implement Agenda for Change, so leadership from within them would be beneficial.

It seems the real risk is as ever about robbing Peter to pay Paul. Protecting the overall trust provision to a community is in the hands of the PCTs. These organisations must resist being leant on to provide government with false ‘wins’. They cannot strip money from one part of the NHS to make another part “super”. What we want is better health care overall, not a system built just to serve a political agenda.

The Britain that gave birth to Darwin's ideas now trumpets "faith" reject evolution and the theory of natural selection. Thank good wave of science centres...

Building science in Glasgow

THE REPUDIATION of industry in recent years has led to a repudiation of science itself. Debates on global warming or gene manipulation often reveal ill-informed "flat earth" perspectives. The Britain that gave birth to Darwin's ideas now trumpets "faith" schools that reject evolution and the theory of natural selection.

All the more timely, then, was the firm warning from the president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Sir Peter Williams, that children are increasingly turning away from science subjects at school. Launching this

year's BA Science Festival at Salford University, he called for attitudes to change urgently in order to save Britain's technology industry and to sustain science and innovation into future generations.

Sir Peter was at pains to close the divide between the sciences and the arts and to re-ignite inspiration and excitement for science. There has been a steady fall in the number of pupils sitting A-level and Higher examinations in biology, chemistry and physics. He worried that, with fewer entering the profession, real wealth creation would

suffer.

Also at the conference, the director of Save British Science, Dr Peter Cotgreave, called for work to inspire young people to persevere with the subject, adding

"Without question one of the very serious root causes of this (fall in numbers) is a drastic and very serious shortage of well qualified and trained science teachers...they do not have enough time to reinvigorate their knowledge of their own subject."

Pioneering

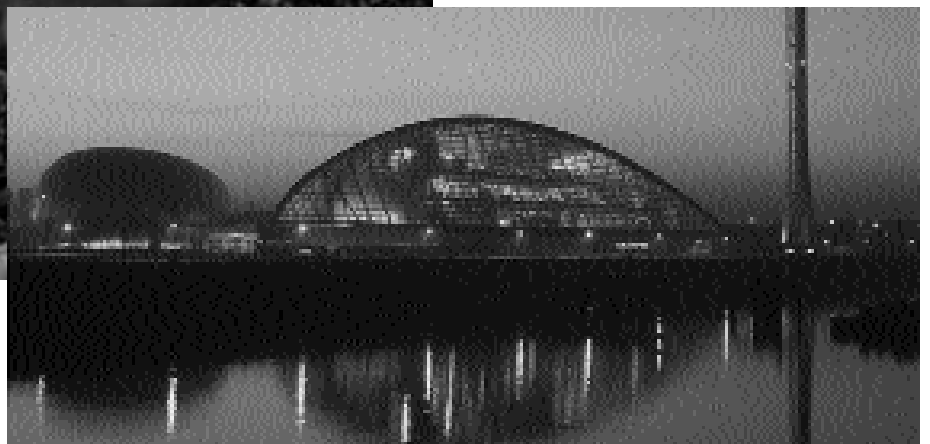
The pioneering of science centres in Britain dedicated to spreading public understanding of science can go a long way towards addressing these needs. When we interviewed Brian Weddell, chief executive of the Glasgow Science Centre, he was glowing with pride, the centre having just achieved its millionth visitor. This month marks his first full year as director. Among his statistics are the 400,000 annual attendances. That figure includes around 60,000 from organised school groups, ranging from 5 to 14-year-olds.

Notably there is also a continuing professional development scheme designed for science teachers. He also outlined ambitious plans to create "learn



Right: the new Glasgow Science Centre, which welcomed its millionth visitor last month.

Above: one of the star attractions, T Rex



"h" schools that ness for the new

direct" and "future skills" programmes specifically encouraging skills for industry and for research and development.

As if pre-empting Sir Peter Williams's urgings to "inspire", Brian Weddell's building is full of exciting hands-on activities. He led us into the e-learning centre — for all ages and abilities, then on to a robotics demonstration. In all there are over 300 world-class science and technology exhibits.

'Science communicators' were conducting live demonstrations on Chemistry, Gas, Forces and Space Technology. An Imax cinema presents scientific ideas while being highly entertaining and especially thrilling for children. And it is tied into both the centre's education programme and the National Curriculum.

Communicating

Communicating scientific ideas at the highest level is enhanced by links to the nearby University of Glasgow, whose research scientists are brought into contact with enthusiastic audiences.

Such a partnership has enabled the development of a fully professional research tool for industry — a virtual reality theatre. This is of use in oil, medicine, pharmaceuticals and molecular imaging. The centre also functions as a conference venue for the science industry.

If centres like Glasgow can help reverse the poverty of funding for Britain's science, it will be to their credit. Valiant efforts have been made to spread scientific ideas, for example the Science Festivals in Edinburgh and other cities, the BA Science Festival, The Earth Centre in Doncaster, the Leicester Space Centre and Magna near Rotherham (see WORKERS, November 2001).

A year ago WORKERS asked, "Are we committed to a scientific future?" The success of these centres and festivals goes a long way towards a positive answer to that question.

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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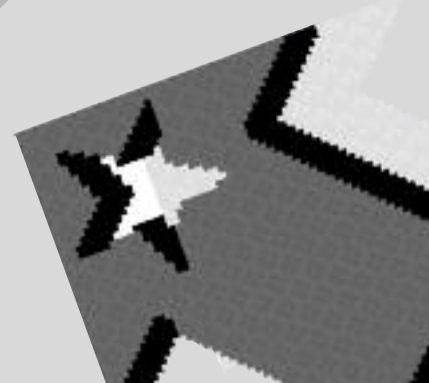
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Back to Front – A fee too far

‘The current total student debt is very close to current expenditure on the continuing war in Iraq...’

EARLIER THIS YEAR the government released the white paper **THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**, which proposed that from 2006 institutions will be able to charge fees of up to £3,000 per student. It appears that this three-year run in period has focussed the minds of students, parents and the public at large to stop the fees and to consider how higher education should be funded.

Sunday 26 October will see a National Demonstration in Central London. The demonstration is part of a vigorous campaign, which has been conducted by the National Union of Students and both the higher education teaching unions, the AUT and NATFHE over the summer months – usually a quieter time for all three unions. It is now clear that top-up fees is now heading the list of this government’s unpopular proposals with its own parliamentary party.

The NUS has been carefully monitoring the current situation. Since the elimination of grants student debt has increased by a massive 544% and now totals over £5 billion. Parents are now paying more than £500 million every year towards the cost of university. 40% of all students now spend an average of 13 hours a week working, or put another way, work on average nearly two full days a week.

Not surprisingly students point out that working is adversely affecting their studies. Against this backdrop the effect of top up fees will be to move the current average cost of a degree, which incurs

nearly £20,000 debt, to a staggering £33,000 by 2010.

Some universities such as Oxford have already seized the opportunity to discuss possibilities to charge fees that go way beyond the proposals in the White Paper. They say this is necessary because increasing numbers of British students are choosing US universities. There is also a trend to study in Scotland, which has already led the British Medical Association to say that fees in England and Wales are affecting the whole of medical education in Britain.

In contrast to the Oxford trend it is clear that many of the new universities are being pressured not to charge maximum fees. They will thus be even worse off by comparison than at present, even though they cater for students most in need of learning support, resulting in even poorer facilities, less pay for staff and generally poorer quality education. Both higher education teaching unions have labelled the White Paper plans as a “recipe for stratification”.

By coincidence, the current total student debt is very close to current expenditure on the continuing war in Iraq. The campaign against top up fees is an opportunity to assert different priorities, to identify what skills and level of education a country needs and how that should be funded.

The government’s White Paper was called the Future of Higher Education. Interestingly it is has sparked debate on what future we want for this country.

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