

WORKERS

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TRADE UNIONS: DEAD OR ALIVE?



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WORKERS

“ Humanitarian war?

ANY NATO attack on Syria would be an outrage, a flagrant act of aggression. There is no justification for attacking Syria. It is not in Britain's or Syria's interests. There is no legal mandate for military intervention, because Russia and China have vetoed at the United Nations Security Council a US-British resolution which would have opened the door for NATO to attack Syria.

The United Nations is founded on state sovereignty, the right of nations to decide their own future. So it is for Syria's people alone to decide what government they want.

The UN charter permits the use of force only in the case of attack or imminent attack on a

sovereign state. Is Syria attacking, or about to attack, another state? No.

The government told us that its wars against Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya were humanitarian wars, that killing by NATO forces would save lives. "Humanitarians" now call for war on Syria, but when has all this self-righteous do-gooding actually done any good?

These wars have simply killed more people. These wars brought not peace and democracy to invaded countries but reaction, disorder, widespread use of torture, warring tribes, break-up of the countries and foreign exploitation. They have and are costing us dearly. No to meddling and war! ■

Seedy commemoration

CAMERON IS rattling sabres to commemorate The Malvinas (Falklands) War of 1982. The war was just a seedy footnote to the undistinguished history of British imperialism, but now the Malvinas – at almost the southernmost tip of the South Atlantic – are declared as one of the furthest outposts of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation .

What value is a NATO outpost in these rocky outcrops? Solely if you are preparing expansionist plans for the raw material wealth of Antarctica or the 60 billion barrels of oil

which are estimated to lie in the islands territory or seas.

Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina all refuse to recognise shipping that flies the Falklands flag. Do Cameron and Clegg think they will emulate Thatcher's warmongering of 1982 and sweep to re-election? Will the French lend Cameron a navy? The withdrawal of British armed forces from every foreign base – Malvinas, Germany, Belize, Gibraltar, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc should be the only commemoration. ■



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**BUDGET****EUROZONE****OLYMPICS****EDUCATION****HEALTH****ENERGY****PROFESSIONS****SPECULATION****EUROBRIEFS****WHAT'S ON**

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Attack on national pay

GEORGE OSBORNE'S announcement in the Budget speech that the government wants to move to regional pay rates is a simple attempt to drive down wages even further. Public sector workers have had pay frozen for two years under the Coalition (and the tail end of Brown's government). They now face that being extended for the next two years, in effect, by 1 per cent wage increases, no wage increases, or wage cuts. Some public sector workers, for example firefighters following on from their disastrous campaign in 2006, have effectively had a pay freeze for the past five years.

The implied abandonment of national bargaining for terms and conditions for public sector workers is a double-edged sword. Such a move in the early 1980s was rapidly shelved. Today a significant number of south of England Tory councils that have abandoned national terms and conditions still have to shadow national agreements or even pay more. But public sector employers will undoubtedly seek to drive down already depressed wage rates in areas of sustained and systemic unemployment and it will take time to regroup battered trade union organisation not only to resist but to go onto the offensive.

Trade union density and organisation is at its lowest ever in the private sector. There is the need to develop a strategy of reconquering that lost ground. Reconquering it not through inter-union squabbles, take-overs or back-room agreements with the employer made without reference to the workers involved. Reconquering has to be through a genuine organising campaign, one that brings about a change in workers' thinking to put collectivity back centre stage.

Public service workers similarly are going to have to think through a strategy over pay to overcome fragmentation of workplaces and bargaining units, massive privatisation and outsourcing, and changes to funding that give the privatised sector the whip hand. As the public sector moves provision of public services into the private sector, one obvious lesson is going to stare us in the face. Private sector provision of public services will be solely about profits. They will not be able to hide their bloated and stolen billions. We have to target our share through future wage fights. Redistribution of wealth starts with fighting for wages, not tinkering with tax rates.

The way our unions organise and function will likewise have to change. Everything will be centred on the workplace, we have to be embedded in work: organisation in the workplace is primary. A study of the resurgence, growth and effectiveness of the rail unions post-privatisation would be a valuable exercise.

We have a choice: reorganise, restructure, re-establish ourselves in the private sector – or die. Fighting for wages is the first step for that resurgence. ■

EUROZONE**Going down, going down**

THE IRISH economy slid back into recession at the end of 2011, as GDP contracted by 0.2 per cent in the final quarter. GNP (which excludes the earnings of large foreign companies) fell 2.2 per cent in the final quarter of 2011, though forecast to grow by 1.5 per cent.

Output growth in Germany slowed in March, economic activity contracted in France and manufacturing across the eurozone fell sharply, all suggesting the eurozone has entered a recession in the first quarter of 2012.

Spanish ten-year borrowing costs rose above 5.5 per cent on 22 March for the first time since January as markets became increasingly concerned over Spain due to weak eurozone growth. ■

DEATH OF THE EURO**Competition oversubscribed**

ON 6 MARCH the Wolfson Economics Prize posted the following notice on its policy exchange website: "Due to the sheer number of Prize entries, we will be publishing the shortlisted submissions later this month."

The task set was submission of a plan for the painless death of the euro. (Precise wording: "The Wolfson Economics Prize will be awarded to the person who is able to articulate how best to manage the orderly exit of one or more member states from the European Monetary Union.")

The prize on offer: a quarter of a million – sterling, of course. The judges are looking for an entry that will take into account the full legal, economic and political ramifications of their solutions. ■

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

EUROBRIEFS

The latest from Brussels

Bailout for bankers

THE "BAILOUT" to Greece totals 282 billion euros so far. Out of that 160 billion euros will go to the country itself. The rest will go to banks and other bondholders.

The EU has told Greece to cut its budget by 20 per cent of GDP by the end of the year. No country has ever had to make such cuts outside of a period of war. Domestic demand will fall as unemployment rises and lending remains frozen, while Greek exports will be held back by the overvalued euro.

Greece will have to cut a further 5.5 per cent of GDP in 2013 and 2014 to meet EU targets according to a leaked report by the EU/IMF/ECB troika. It warns, "The recovery previously announced for next year will be further delayed with, at best, a stagnation of activity in 2013."

Northern exposure

GERMANY'S potential cost in the eurozone bailouts is 72.9 billion euros, equal to Germany's defence, transport and healthcare spending combined.

Landing a fortune

SOME OF Britain's wealthiest landowners get millions in subsidies from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. Payments are linked to the amount of agricultural land a person owns; the largest landowners get the most. In 2010, across Britain, 709 raked in more than £250,000, 133 more than £500,000 and 47 more than £1 million.

Unpopular vote

A NEW IPR Marketing poll asked Italians about their new EU-imposed government. A hypothetical "party of technocrats", including Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti and some members of his cabinet, would get just 22 per cent of votes if it were to stand in the next general election. That is EU-style democracy for you.

We want a referendum

A RECENT YouGov-Cambridge poll on public attitudes to the EU found that 60 per cent of us want a referendum to decide on Britain's relationship with the EU. The same number want a looser relationship or to leave altogether. 14 per cent want more integration, and 13 per cent want to keep things as they are. ■



Photo: Workers

Central Hall Westminster was packed on 7 March as representatives from all unions in the NHS gathered to protest against the Health and Social Care Bill. Pictured: Cecilia Anim from the Royal College of Nursing speaks from the platform. An e-petition reaching 100,000 signatures is referred to the Backbench Business Committee for consideration of suitability for debate. The 600,000 signature e-petition demanding debate on the Health and Social Care Bill was declined by Health Secretary Lansley. So much for the concept of petitioning the government by email so as to have the opportunity for "citizen" control of business coming before parliament.

Olympic ban on leave

UTILITY WORKERS in gas, water and electricity are being threatened with a ban on leave during the three months during and around the Olympics and being forced to work 12-hour shifts during the actual games. All pretence of social priority in guaranteeing power or water to the elderly, schools or business is now being overridden with only one priority: keep the Olympic stadium and other sites working without interruption.

Local authority workers in the London boroughs directly affected – Tower Hamlets, Newham and Greenwich – are being told to work extended days, sleep in makeshift camp bed provision, all without recompense. Rail workers and bus crews have already achieved or are pursuing additional payments to meet the demand for longer hours and extended public transport provision. Health workers are facing a similar threat of holiday bans and heightening of security as London becomes a militarised zone during July-September.

The TUC fiddles with cosy agreements with the companies providing security, catering and site infrastructure – Compass, Amadeus and Sodexo – providing for US-style corporate union recruitment to try and recruit the thousands of short term workers, here today, gone tomorrow, while the Olympic organisers try to head off industrial disputes.

A whole industry has arisen offering advice on how to overcome the predicted massive disruption across London, when the road and rail infrastructure will groan under hundreds of thousands of additional daily journeys across the capital. It's predicted there will no longer be one rush hour at each end of the day but five or six throughout the day.

Paying for the Olympics will cost every Londoner a council tax supplement until 2042 and it is still a secret how many millions of tickets have gone to company corporate sponsorship and brand promotion. ■

EDUCATION

Academies fight

EDUCATION SECRETARY Michael Gove has met fierce opposition to his attempt to force state schools to convert to "independent" academies. At four primaries in Haringey, north London, parents and staff are fighting the move. At Downhills Primary the opposition has been particularly fierce, with governors refusing to connive with the move, and parents united against Gove. Now an Ofsted

inspection has deemed the school as "failing". Under intense pressure, a widely respected headteacher has resigned. The entire governing body has now been replaced by a group of government appointees.

Gove wants all state schools to convert to academies, with their budgets removed from local authority school funds and handed over by government to spend as they wish, setting them apart from the local community of schools. By 1 January just 360 out of 17,000 schools had switched voluntarily – hence the use of force. ■

ENERGY**EU forces power station closure**

KINGSNORTH POWER station in Kent is to be forced to close under EU emissions reduction targets. It had exceeded its total production quota. The 123 workers employed there by E.ON will lose their jobs.

The power station has fallen victim to the EU diktat to substitute coal-fired generation by wind farms and renewable sources of energy. That policy now sees Kingsnorth and the mothballed Grain power station marooned at the Isle of Grain.

The subsidies and profits are faster and greater from wind farms than from long-term investment in refitting Kingsnorth to

burn coal in a clean and sustainable operation.

The impact on the local Isle of Grain economy will be devastating. It is estimated that seven jobs outside the station depend on every job inside.

Attempts to install clean coal-burning technology at the station were frustrated by environmental protesters despite E.ON and local authority support.

Kingsnorth supplies the equivalent of two million homes, and its early closure brings ever closer the crisis gap in electricity supply and demand. The proposed closure has been accelerated by power company greed, which boosted coal station generation during the winter of 2010 as profit returns were greater than using gas-fired stations. ■

NHS alarm over language

ALARMED BY the criticism of health professionals and their unions that the EU Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRPQ) Directive 2005 allows EU health professionals to join Britain's professional registers without a test for language competency, the NHS employers' confederation produced "Language competency: good practice guidance for employers" in February 2012.

But the document has, if anything, underlined that alarm. It underlines the different position of non EU v EU nationals: "Individuals who have trained and qualified outside the EEA [European Economic Area] must satisfy Britain's regulatory bodies of their knowledge of English." In contrast EEA professionals: "are exempt from any routine assessment for language competency before registration". In any other employment context this would be deemed as discriminatory. It certainly discriminates against patient safety.

It gets worse. In response to union and patient organisation concerns, government in recent weeks has stressed that employers can "test" for language competency. However this "good practice" document rules out routine testing: "employers must not systematically test all applicants from the EEA. For example, making all applicants sit the same test, even though they may be able to demonstrate their competence in other ways, is not permitted". Again, in other contexts this advice would be deemed discriminatory.

One good thing that could have emerged from this good practice guide would be to alert employers that the EU directive is up for re-negotiation. But the fact that the EU commission is currently conducting a review is cunningly disguised in a microscopic footnote on page 3 of the guidance! The professional and patient demand is simple and clear: no health professional should join the register without the public being assured of their language competency. ■

ENVIRONMENT**Pellets and profits**

TILBURY POWER station, owned by Germany's RWE and one of 14 remaining coal-fired power stations in Britain, has converted to burning wood to avoid the EU Large Combustion Plant Directive.

It is now the world's largest biomass power station – burning wood pellets from Georgia, USA, which attracts 100 per cent subsidies from the European Union. The drawback: the burning efficiency is 25 per cent less than using coal, so the station has dropped from 1100 megawatts generation to 750 megawatts.

The Directive was supposed to reduce

pollution and carbon dioxide emissions. Yet more CO₂ is produced from biomass generation than from burning coal. To deal with the CO₂ emission would require clean coal technology filtering and storing, as at Kingsnorth or Drax in Yorkshire. But because biomass burns wood not coal it is exempt from the Directive. The carbon footprint of importing the wood from Georgia is also ignored - and Tilbury requires 500,000 tons of wood pellets a year.

On 27 February a fire occurred at Tilbury Power Station when over 120 fire-fighters had to put out a fire in 6,000 tons of wood pellets, which as "green" wood have a habit of self-combusting. ■

WHAT'S ON**Coming soon****April/May**

CPBML/Workers May Day Meetings

Destroy the European Union, Defeat War, Rebuild Britain

Saturday 28 April, 12 noon. The Pack Horse pub, 208 Woodhouse Road, Leeds LS2 9DX

Tuesday 1 May, 7.00pm. Word Power Books, 43 West Nicolson Street, Edinburgh EH8 9DB

Tuesday 1 May, 7.30pm. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Nearest tube Holborn.

See advertisement, page 8. All welcome.

Beyond the Frame: Contemporary Cuban Art

Monday 23 April to Saturday 28 April, Gallery 27, 27 Cork Street, London W1S 3NG

Monday 7 May to Sunday 13 May, The Lighthouse Gallery, Glasgow G1 3NU

An exhibition and sale of original works by 29 of Cuba's leading artists. See www.cubabeyondtheframe.com.

SPECULATION**A spare half billion, anyone?**

LONDON'S BATTERSEA Power Station, which ceased generation in 1983, is now on the market for £500 million. For 40 years it has been unproductive other than on the asset registers of banks, developers and fantasists. A reflection of capitalism in decline, it has turned from producing useful power into an engine of speculation.

Alton Towers Leisure Park bought the site for £1.5 million in 1983 and stripped its assets, just leaving the iconic turbine hall towers. Redevelopment plans followed thick and fast with numerous changes of ownership. All the while the costs of doing nothing sent debts soaring.

From a site worth £1.5 million, it became £35 million, to £70 million. Selling the debt became very profitable. Real Estate Opportunities, with links into Ireland's failed banks, Jersey fundraisers, New York planners and Uruguay architects, bought it for £400 million in 2006, looking to raise £4 billion for another redevelopment – 25,000 office workers and 3,400 flats housing 28,000 inhabitants. The crash of Irish banks swept away the delusion.

From 1983 to 2010 the site has been idle except for being used as a film lot, for advert promotions and the launch of the Tory election manifesto in 2010. ■

Construction workers have won a major victory in their fight to keep their national agreements. Winning future battles requires an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses...

Building bosses fail to impose contract

THE ATTEMPT by a group of seven building industry employers to scrap existing national agreements covering mechanical, electrical and engineering construction and to impose their own agreements has failed.

They started off aggressively and in high hopes, with five of the companies saying they would sack their workforces on 7 December 2011 and re-employ them on the new set of conditions, known as BESNA (Building Engineering Services National Agreement – see WORKERS November 2011). Over the months the seven companies have had to back down, withdraw from BESNA and return to the previous national agreements. The last of the seven withdrew on 24 February. BESNA is no more.

The union campaign has been protracted – necessarily so – but the death of BESNA is a significant victory. Negotiations between the union and the employers' body, the Heating and Ventilation Contractors Association, are back on.

Just a truce

The war has not ended, though. If, as is suspected, the main issue of the dispute has merely been put on hold, and the negotiations are going to founder, then the coming months must be used to re-organise the industry, particularly the electrical side. Part of that process must be an honest recognition of the realities of a dispute that has never been easy and where mistakes were made.

What led to the abandoned attempt to impose BESNA is now the subject of contention. Was it the “Rank and File” (R&F) organisation set up at a meeting of some 500 workers on 13 August 2011 in London, electing from their number a “national committee”? Or was it won by the union, Unite? The truth is that it was a combination of both but there is a continuing disconnection that needs to be resolved – or at least more clearly understood.

Four days after R&F began, Unite held a meeting of its Electrical, Plumbing and Mechanical Shop Stewards Forum in

Leeds. Two of the R&F committee attended and put forward a motion from the R&F meeting, which called on the forum and the Union to begin a campaign. The motion was not taken: the campaign had already begun and as many aspects of the motion were already in train it was therefore superfluous.

A subsequent Forum decided to target Balfour Beatty Engineering Services (BBES) for industrial action, as it was the leading employer of the seven and had the largest workforce. Unite balloted some 600 members, aiming to begin strike action from 7 December – the day dismissal notices were due to be issued. The result was 360 voting Yes (81.6 per cent) and 81 No (18.4 per cent).

Ballots and courts

BBES's response was to seek and obtain an injunction. Unite then announced an immediate re-ballot – over the Christmas period! Fortunately wiser counsel prevailed and the second ballot began at the start of January. This time 295 voted in favour of a strike with 145 against. BBES again challenged the ballot, but this time Unite decided to fight the decision through the courts.

Meanwhile the R&F called for an all-out strike irrespective of the court's ruling – seemingly oblivious to the relative weakness of the membership and the certainty that Unite would not risk having its assets seized by the courts (not because the union would not want to but because unlike in the AUEW's struggle with the Industrial Relations Act in the 1970s, the membership now is unlikely to defend the union in the same way).

At no point did the R&F propaganda help or support the union to achieve positive results by calling on all existing members to contact the union to ensure they held correct details necessary for an accurate ballot. Balloting workers within the law is hard enough for a union, especially those workers whose job means they are regularly on the move (and employers constantly use mobility clauses to mess up ballots).

Neither did they call on existing

members to recruit those non-members working next to them and engage more fully in the dispute – BBES said in court it employed more than 1,200 construction workers, double the number balloted.

The implication was that recruitment is “the union's job” and if it failed then it would be the union's fault, not the “rank and file's”. And yet the best recruiters have always been “the ordinary members”.

Still, the R&F was “welcomed into the team” in early January, with Unite providing funding for travel to demonstrations, protests and meetings, and so on, in recognition of its value and despite the vitriol that full-time officers had previously received at the various meetings they “dared” to attend in England and Wales. (It should be made clear that this sort of relationship did not exist in Scotland.) Besides, many full-time officers were prominent in the numerous demonstrations being held on a weekly basis around the country.

The court gave its decision on 16 February – giving Unite the right to legally call a strike. The judge commented, “I think it fair to say that Unite went to considerable lengths to ensure democratic legitimacy which might be thought to exceed what would ordinarily be expected.” Within 24 hours BBES had withdrawn from BESNA. The following day, NG Bailey withdrew and by 24 February the remainder had run for the hills. BESNA was history. Negotiations will now begin with the union, whose team includes representatives from the R&F.

Would BBES have backed down if the judgement had gone their way, even in the face of the weekly demos? They certainly hadn't done so up to then. There is no doubt that the demonstrations, protests and the “civil disobedience” were having an effect and drawing a good deal of attention to the dispute, but would they be enough to win? These actions had been ongoing since the middle of August so clearly they alone had not persuaded the employers to back down.

It is also fair to say that Unite's Organising Department was slow off the mark despite the fact that the battle



Photo: Workers

London, 9 November 2011. Protest at the Shard against the employers' plans to withdraw from the JIB national agreements.

contained all the ingredients upon which the "organising model" thrives, ie a global corporation with union-organised workforces overseas. When eventually it was brought in, connections with sister unions in the USA and Australia were made and they engaged in supportive demonstrations and representations to arms of BBES there. A programme of action against anything and everything connected with BBES was set out and commenced. The battle, however, has to be won on home soil.

Misrepresentation

Such headlines as "The 'Rank and File' won the BESNA battle. Now let's win the war" are not only a misrepresentation but also beg the question as to what is "the war"? It would appear that it is to do with securing a better agreement with the employers and "reclaiming the union for the members" – conveniently forgetting that only the members can do that for themselves. For R&F to claim that they and they alone secured the victory is both far fetched and ultimately dangerous: it belittles the union's machinery and implies it is unnecessary; it is also plainly untrue.

The R&F is not only made up of genuine active electricians/union members but, as usual, also has among its number

individuals from the various ultra-left groupings, who with monotonous regularity latch onto any struggle going. Although "ordinary" workers may utilise the presence of these groupings in the absence of genuine leaders coming to the fore, they will not be fooled into thinking that they are the answer.

Unite's Forum in Leeds in August last year called for maximum unity to face the attack, a demand that should be obvious to all. But clearly some people, with their own agendas, see division as more beneficial. With their hatred of appointed full-time officers (as if being elected is a guarantee of commitment to the cause) and a starting point that the union will sell out and make sweetheart deals – unity clearly does not suit their aims.

For example, R&F reported on the meeting saying, "2 of the newly ELECTED committee went to Leeds on 17th August for a Unite shop stewards meeting which was full of appointed UNELECTED Unite officers, apart from 4 or 5 elected stewards and activists." It went on to say its reps urged that a campaign be started immediately, but that National Officer Bernard McAulay "told us it would be best to wait until January or February 2012 before we should start a campaign and get our army together".

The impression is of a meeting packed where full-time officers hugely outnumbered the rest. Yet the minutes of the meeting show some 26 stewards/activists and 14 full-time officers – and that the campaign had already started. Indeed, this type of misrepresentation from R&F publications is typical.

If negotiations hit that brick wall then the membership must be in a position to take the employers on, and fight to win. This will not be achieved by constant facile references to "sell-outs" and "sweetheart deals" but by painstaking recruitment and the development of genuine organisation. Those who have involved themselves in the R&F must take that enthusiasm into the union's structures and onto the sites – because if the call comes again, there may not be time to chase around trying to collect accurate details. Engaging in the challenging activity of arguing with fellow workers is not the preserve of full-time officers but is the responsibility of all truly worried workers.

The withdrawal from BESNA has presented a breathing space – not to bask in reflected glory but to get better organised. The employers know what they are after and inevitably they will come again. ■

CPBML/Workers MAY DAY MEETINGS



Saturday 28 April, 12 noon

Speakers and discussion

The Pack Horse, 208 Woodhouse Lane, Leeds LS2 9DX

Tuesday 1 May, 7.00 pm

Speakers, music and discussion

Word Power Books,

43 West Nicolson St, Edinburgh EH8 9DB

Tuesday 1 May, 7.30 pm

Speakers and refreshments

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

(nearest tube: Holborn)

DESTROY THE EUROPEAN UNION, DEFEAT WAR, REBUILD BRITAIN

Across the states comprising the European Union unelected financial cliques or self-styled “right wing” governments are being installed in power to do the bidding of the European Union Commissioners, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund. Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland are sacrificed to the obscenity of monopoly finance capital – the Banks.

In Britain, Cameron and his Coalition government, supported by Miliband, hint at the desire for an unelected “government of national unity”. Fascism, the unbridled rule of monopoly capitalism, grows with every breath the EU takes.

Every attack on British workers in the past 40 years has been orchestrated by the British ruling class hiding behind EU legislation and directives. The deindustrialisation of Britain, devolution, theft of our national assets, the assaults on education, housing, health, welfare, pensions, migration, the right to work – all are rooted in the EU. To save Britain we

have to destroy the European Union.

The EU breaks up nations, colonises nations within Europe and, as an armed camp, threatens Africa, the Middle East and Russia. The drive for a European Army and Police Force, in cooperation with NATO, is the greatest threat to peace in the last 60 years. Destroy the European Union and defeat the drive to war.

We are for the rebuilding of Britain. Independent, sovereign, determining our own affairs, trading with whom we wish, beholden to no one. Building the industry, skills, education, health, transport, housing, employment to meet the aspirations and expectations of British workers in the 21st century.

This cannot be achieved inside the EU. This cannot be achieved under the threat of EU aggression. It can be achieved by us, the British working class, rebuilding Britain for the working class.

Celebrate May Day with the Communist Party. All welcome

It is time to forget the fads and the political play fighting. Get back to the workplace...

Trade unions – dead or alive?

ON 1 DECEMBER 2011 a sub headline in the London EVENING STANDARD newspaper decried: “Barely a million take strike action.”

Barely a million – this was genuinely written as if to dismiss the biggest strike in a generation, when well over a million public sector workers took strike action to protect their pensions on 30 November. This was easily the biggest show of union strength since the “winter of discontent” and possibly since 1926.

But while the numbers are indeed impressive, and the attempt to belittle this demonstration of collective organisation ridiculous, another story is told if the number is converted into a percentage of all those entitled to take action.

Had the EVENING STANDARD said only 35 per cent took strike action it would look quite different. A third take strike action doesn't sound half as good as a million. So why is this important? Because 30 November was a paradox. On the one hand it was collective organisation in action, but on the other it showed that this action was not absolute, resolute or sustainable. The strike and its aftermath illustrate where unions are today.

State of the unions

The current balance sheet is not good for unions. We have a declining membership and massive cuts in traditionally unionised areas – a membership fearful, demoralised and apathetic. Unions are continually subject to a media hate campaign. They endure straight hostility from the Coalition and indifference from the party in opposition. Trade unions operate in an almost fascist legal environment where every action is scrutinised and subject to the courts' interpretations.

On the plus side Britain still has over 10 million workers organising themselves within their workplaces. Union membership is worth 20 per cent more in pay.

In 2010 the average hourly rate was £14 for union members; £12 for non-union members.

This article is an edited version of a speech given at a CPBML public meeting in London in February.



RMT banners on Tyneside during the November action on pensions.

Photo: Stephanie Delvin

Professionals join unions – much more than do the lowest paid. Those that need most to act together are being picked off by employers and left marginalised by the lack of collective bargaining. 2010 statistics show a trend that membership levels have settled but collective bargaining is dying. Less than a third of employees are covered by collective agreements, with significantly fewer – 16 per cent – in the private sector and around 65 per cent in the public sector. But the past decade saw a fall of 10 per cent during a time of expansion in public sector jobs and improvements in union-government relations.

Too big to fail?

Unions are sitting targets without the flexibility or agility to respond to disputes or attacks from employers or government. The sheer effort it takes to avoid Tribunal or Certification claims means unions are defensive and bureaucratic.

The consequences of breaching the draconian trade union laws are such that a union is rightly terrified. Sequestered funds means bankruptcy. For all the cash ferried round in 1984 during the miners' strike, the fact is now a union would collapse and people would end up in jail for money laundering.

Despite the rhetoric in the mission statement of Unite, the bigger the union the less coherent the thread of solidarity

that runs through the disparate and fragmented membership.

The corporate behaviour of SEIU, the US-based Service Employees International Union, or even of Unite, is the antithesis of the movement. In the quest for expansion the organisations are over-reaching, tearing apart the very fabric that made the body strong to start with. It is fatal. But they want to become bigger still. Unite-PCS? UCU-NUT? Union mergers fuelled by ultra left fantasists.

A whole body of academics, think tanks and trade unionists pontificate and conjecture about the future of the movement. Too many start at the highpoint of TU membership – 12 million in 1979 - and ask how to survive this fatal decline – 6 million at present. Very few actually ask the simple question: How did we have 12 million members in 1979? What drove this and was it sustainable in a changing Britain? The movement originated at a time when the act of membership was a crime, and burst into life, becoming a political and industrial force at a time when strikes were unlawful.

But now fad and fashion have taken hold across unions, TUC and academics – even in research. The claim is made that the main reason people have not joined a

Continued on page 10

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union is that they haven't been asked. Really? Anyone who has spent any time talking to non-members will know this is rubbish but it is part of the myths that have kidded much of the movement. Most of the people answering the question in this research are in non-unionised workplaces. So the real answer is because there was no union in my workplace.

The insurance approach

This obsession with arresting decline led unions to adopt an employee insurance approach. The attempt has backfired as too many members see the union as a cheap legal service and the weight of European laws has forced ever more disputes into the courts and out of the workplace.

Belatedly unions have recognised that a service-based model is bad for members and bad for the organisation. But in its place is the new fetish called organising, and in this unions tend to look abroad: the wrong answer to the wrong question.

Take the SEIU. What on earth can we

learn from a US organisation that is the product of ruthless corporate unionism still numbering only 2 million members, in a country with a 300 million population? Britain has 65 million people, and its biggest union is 1.4 million strong. As a percentage of the population, Unison has 2 per cent of the population, while SEIU has 0.75 per cent. Yet we are seeking lessons from them?

Another buzzword of the moment is community organising. We've failed to use our inherent strength through the workplace and demonstrable through collective action? Instead, let's pop round to the vicar and ask him to write a letter about cuts. If a union is strong and organised in the workplace it will de facto play a role in the community.

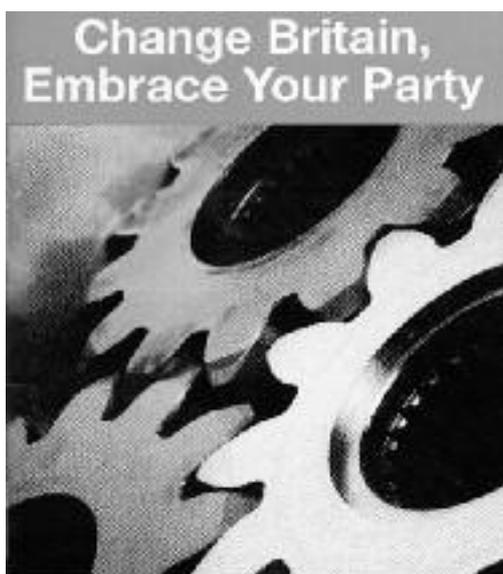
Unions are 19th-century organisations in a 21st century world. We should be proud of our traditions but free ourselves from dated language in communications. Members rarely read letters or newsletter from their union so using mass media is essential. And presentationally the unions have far to go. Unions constantly allow the

media to set the terms of the debate and very rarely know how to rebut the lies and spin. Few unions have a genuine media strategy or even understand the media.

The same is true for IT and the web. But in the rush to seem trendy and relevant unions have jumped on a social media bandwagon without understanding the lack of control. Technology is a great tool but discipline is hard to maintain when everyone is on Twitter or blogging within seconds of any action, meeting or event. If you followed Twitter about pensions you would have had the strangest impression about who belongs to unions and why! The vast majority of union members still gather information from the broadcast media, not their union.

Whatever its weakness the 30 November action was an awesome display of strength that forced the government to shift. It wasn't outright victory but clearly not a defeat or a capitulation, as so many mad ultras would have you believe.

But the episode is a good example because it demonstrates once again that the activist base in so many of our unions



Change Britain, Embrace Your Party

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is dominated by the naysayers and the impossibilists that engender demoralisation and reinforce the notion that unions are weak. It is these so-called fighters and militants that are strangling the unions.

Roughly a third of union members took part in the ballot. Most agree that it was just above half the membership taking action. This means that with membership density rarely above 50 per cent we had 1 in 4 employees on strike.

Anybody who spent time with workers on the ground knew that workers were resistant to striking. When convinced as to why we had to they were clear that sustained action would not be achieved through lots more days of action.

The government position had hardened after the strike in June as they could sense victory. But they overplayed their hand and spent much of November trying to return to where they had been – why? Because now there were millions about to walk out.

It also helped that the government was incapable of recognising the difference between the schemes. This inability ensured the employers were silent. The employers played a major part in the dispute but for the most part it was in the unions' favour.

When the Treasury publicly supported the unions' Heads of Agreement, it was announced that attempts to introduce 50 per cent ballots would be shelved and other consultations would be revisited.

But this wasn't a concession. It was a tactical withdrawal. The government knows the laws are so tight that to tighten further will mean workers break them with or without unions. This is the lesson from every anti-trade union law. Eventually the workers will break the chains.

This government was not able to go to war with unions – despite its hopes – and workers showed genuine strength.

To call for a continuing “rolling programme” of strikes is weak and self-defeating. We have to be smarter – conserve our forces and fight where we are strong on the ground.

Some union leaders want to be commentators on the Westminster theatre



London, 12 March 2012: Demonstrating for pensions.

rather than participants in the industrial struggle. When they forced the issue over the Labour leadership, to choose between Milibands, they found they had installed a puppet with faulty strings. The same old cries of why fund the Labour Party etc spring up, but not a single union is seriously looking into cutting links. The Labour Party has infiltrated the union movement.

The terms of political discussion are dominated by more fads and identity politics. Real politics is on the shop floor, the factory canteen and the

open-plan office.

Workers will organise themselves whatever we call the organisation. Wages, hours and safety were and remain the driving issues for the working class.

The local workplace is the most effective unit to build solidarity and purpose. In the workplace workers can bargain together, resist attacks together and defend each other.

So it is time to forget the fads and the political play fighting. Get back to the workplace. Build and develop solidarity at the most local level to the members. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain's new series of London public meetings began on 29 September 2011 and will finish on 14 June; except on May Day, all are held in the Bertrand Russell room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL, nearest Tube Holborn. Other meetings are held around Britain. All meetings will be advertised in What's On, see page 5.

M The next meeting is the Party's annual London May Day rally – always held on May Day itself, regardless of state bank holidays – on Tuesday 1 May, in Conway Hall, Holborn. There will also be May Day meetings elsewhere in the country; see the advertisement on page 8.

M As well as our regular public meetings we hold informal discussions with interested workers and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further. If you are interested we want to hear from you. Call us on 020 8801 9543 or e-mail to info@workers.org.uk



A case study of one London borough exposes the lie peddled by p
and the south is rich...

The affluent South East? Take a closer look

PEOPLE ARE often bemused by the difference between what they experience in their everyday lives and what politicians tell us is happening. The problem for politicians is that we work and live in the real world, so we're not easily fooled. And good statistics can tell us a truth that politicians would rather ignore or hide.

The term "affluent London and the southeast" trips off the tongues of politicians and is used sloppily in the media, usually in an attempt to divide us and foster resentment. Alex Salmond is fond of the term. And it's true that average incomes are highest in London and the South East, but this fact covers another reality.

The east London borough of Tower Hamlets has one of the highest average incomes for those in work yet is one of the poorest local authorities in the country, with 27 per cent of its children living in poverty. Consider its high level of unemployment together with the presence of Canary Wharf (with many highly paid employees living in the borough during the working week) and a picture emerges of huge discrepancies in incomes. This picture is replicated to a greater or lesser degree around London.

In Britain as a whole, the picture painted by statistics is grim. A 2011 index, which mapped health and social problems against income gaps between the highest paid and the rest in 20 developed countries, showed Britain as having the third worst record.

Problem factors

It is no surprise that countries with the biggest gaps have the worst problems. The problem factors included life expectancy, infant mortality, murder rate, imprisonment, mental illness and obesity. The US "leads" the field by a long way (interesting when we are constantly encouraged to emulate the way they do things), followed by Portugal, then Britain (Greece comes fifth). Within Britain, London is home to the richest and some of the poorest people in Western Europe, and it has the biggest income gap in the EU.

Britain's youth and adult



unemployment is among the highest in Europe. Incomes here fell 3.5 per cent in real terms in 2011, with inflation 5 per cent or higher during the year. Many lower paid professionals effectively had sizeable falls in pay, while senior managers and directors had massive rises. There is a trend towards part-time working due to high unemployment levels. For those in work, incomes are often too low to live on and are "topped up" by working tax credit – a direct subsidy from the people to poverty-wage employers. In London, 20.7 per cent of children live in households where nobody works.

A dramatic rise in the population of young children in parts of Britain is leading to an acute shortage in school places. Based on government data, it is estimated

that half a million new primary places will be needed by 2015 – the equivalent of over 2000 new primary schools. The spurt in child population is particularly acute in some outer London boroughs, where old school buildings are bursting at the seams.

London has a high proportion of the population living in overcrowded accommodation; 7.2 per cent of households compared with 2.3 per cent in the rest of England. It also has one of the lowest levels in the country of under-occupation (households having two or more bedrooms more than they need). And every space is likely to be grabbed for building. The average density of new build in London in 2009/10 was 121 dwellings per hectare, three times the next highest region in Britain and the England average.

politicians – usually seeking to divide us – that the north is poor

Work – the real world is rather different

The Greater London Authority estimates that at least 380,000 undocumented migrants live in London, about 5 per cent of the population. An additional 3-4 per cent have been awarded refugee status. In 2008 about a third of all arrivals in England intending to stay stated London as their destination – around 160,000 people. There is a high rate of people moving in and out of London boroughs – called population “churn”. In nine boroughs over 10 per cent of the resident population moved in or out in 2008. This makes the planning of services very difficult.

Consider the situation of one outer London borough, Waltham Forest in the north east of the capital. The Central and Victoria tube lines both run through the borough, so housing is at a premium and the population has traditionally been mixed, with professional, semi-skilled and unskilled workers living side by side. But conditions in the borough for workers are now deteriorating rapidly, as this case study shows.

Jobless London

The Claimants to Vacancy Ratio (Office of National Statistics) listed the ratio of registered Jobseekers to available jobs in 206 regions of Britain and northern Ireland in 2011. London contained most of the worst 40 ratios. Travelling from west to east London on the Central Line life expectancy decreases dramatically: at Notting Hill Gate in the west it is 84.3 years for men and 88.9 for women; at Leyton in Waltham Forest it is 76.5 for men and 81.2 for women.

Youth unemployment in Waltham Forest rose by 3 per cent in 2011 alone, the biggest rise in the country. 12.6 per cent of 18-24 year-olds claim Jobseekers Allowance – one of the highest rates in Britain.

National trends affecting schools in Waltham Forest include the rapid conversion of local authority schools to academies and the creation of free schools, both of whose funding is removed from the local authority education budget by government, and to reductions in local authority expenditure and in support services for schools. The axing of the

Housing in Waltham Forest

Of 98,180 registered domestic residential dwellings, 21,280 are social rented (council or housing association), 22 per cent of the total.

The **private rented sector** increased from 18 per cent in 2001 to 32 per cent in 2011. The average stay in the private rented sector is 4 years – this has a significant impact on the turnover of borough residents and communities.

The **average joint household income** is just under £29,000. At that income housing in the borough is unaffordable. The waiting list for social housing is long and growing, particularly as people are driven out of central London by new rules governing social rents.

Private rents are rising rapidly, making them unaffordable for many, particularly

for family-sized homes.

Council rents are to rise by an average of 6.9 per cent from April 2012, with some much higher.

There are 3,910 **registered houses in multiple occupancy**, 5 per cent of the total. The true figure is likely to be much higher, with small Victorian terraced housing in the private sector sometimes unofficially housing a family in each room. Changes in Housing Benefit will bring greatly increased demand.

Waltham Forest now has the highest levels of **homelessness** in the country. Of every 1,000 inhabitants, 2.55 are homeless. A local soup kitchen reports a steep rise this year in nightly visitors, with a significant proportion being from eastern Europe. ■

Building Schools for the Future programme has affected schools badly, as it has left many schools in poor buildings at a time when medium- and long-term capital funding is seriously in doubt.

In addition to all this, there has been a significant rise in the population in the borough, leading to an increase in demand for school places. In London as a whole a rapidly rising population means an estimated shortfall of 70,000 primary school places by 2015, with a funding shortfall of £1.76 billion. In Waltham Forest each year brings crisis planning of new reception places (for 4- and 5-year olds). Now the local authority is seeking space in existing schools for a further 22 reception classes from this September. There can be no new local authority schools to cope with the crisis – the government only permits new academies and free schools now.

It is common for local primary children to have to eat their dinners in the classroom because of lack of space in school canteens and halls. PE, dancing and music are difficult to manage with the increased numbers, and school libraries and ICT suites are becoming fast-disappearing luxuries. A number of

primaries are to take an additional 60 children starting from this September. In an already overcrowded borough there is no space to expand, so other buildings are being taken over as “annexes” for additional classes. In one case, Portacabins on a car park behind a bookmaker in a local shopping centre 15 minutes walk away is a solution being considered. The situation is desperate.

This case study does not deal with other aspects of life in Waltham Forest, such as health, social care and social services, the pressure on infrastructure, and so on, with their own crises. Of course, many of the problems affecting Waltham Forest so acutely are mirrored all over Britain. So let’s stop allowing politicians et al to refer unchallenged to “the affluent South East”. ■

Sources of statistics

Focus on London 2011 Housing: a growing city. Greater London Authority
London’s poverty profile. Trust for London and New Policy Institute
The impact of recent immigration on the London economy. London School of Economics 2007

Though lying only 300 miles from Argentina and 8,000 miles from the Falkland Islands remain a remote imperial relic...

The Falkland Islands: a long way from being

ABOUT 3,000 people live in a group of islands in the southwest Atlantic, just above the Antarctic Circle, propped up by Britain. The economy is based on fishing, agriculture (with sheep farming predominant), tourism and latterly oil exploration. The islands are claimed by Argentina, which calls them “las Malvinas”.

It is unclear who first truly discovered the Falkland Islands, though they attracted attention in the 16th and 17th centuries when European powers began their imperial expansion. Spanish navigator and explorer Ferdinand Magellan may have been the first to find the islands on his 1519/21 expedition, though this is disputed. Other sightings of the islands were made by the Portuguese, Dutch and British in the 1500s.

Barren

By the late 1600s Britain and France had re-discovered the barren and still uninhabited islands as their ships were sailing in the area. Britain named them the Falkland Islands while France called them Les Isles Nouvelles or Les Iles Malouines. The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 ratified Spain's control over the territories and seas of the Americas.

In 1764 it was France that founded a first settlement at Port Louis, though it made no formal claim. In 1765, a British expedition explored and claimed the islands, and a British settlement was founded at Port Egmont in 1776 introducing cattle, goats, sheep and pigs to the islands. But in 1767, France ceded Port Louis to Spain (which it renamed Puerto Soledad) in exchange for compensation.

Some maintain that as a result Spain occupied and administered the Malvinas from 1767 until Argentinian independence and national liberation from Spain in 1816; others say that Spain only had control over Puerto Soledad. Spain withdrew its governor in 1806 while maintaining its claims. The remaining Spanish-speaking settlers withdrew in 1811, though more arrived from the United Provinces of the River Plate in the 1820s

and an Argentine penal settlement in 1832. Even a United States warship arrived in 1831, though nothing permanent ensued.

In 1833 British forces returned to the islands, which became a coaling station for the British navy. From 1840 a permanent British colony was established, and the islands became a strategic point for navigation around Cape Horn for the British Empire. Between 1931 and 1982 neglect saw the population there decline from 2,392 people to 1,800. It's risen now to 3,000, a number swollen by military garrisons and seekers after possible oil reserves in the waters around the islands.

Argentina says its right to possession of the islands stems from being heirs of the Spanish empire, as well as territorial proximity. Argentina pressed its claim for sovereignty over the islands with renewed vigour in the second half of the 20th century.

Talks between British and Argentine foreign missions took place in the 1960s, but failed to come to a conclusion, mainly because the islanders wanted the islands to remain British territory. But the talks led in 1971 to the islands' first air link, with a service from Argentina to Stanley, the islands' capital, (which operated until 1982). Later the Argentine national oil and gas company was given a monopoly over the supply of the islands' energy needs.

Invasion

On 2 April 1982, Argentina's military junta, hoping to divert growing internal opposition, ordered their armed forces to invade the Falkland Islands, no doubt encouraged by Britain's reduction in military capacity in the South Atlantic.

Thatcher's government sent an expeditionary force to retake the islands, leading to the Falklands War. Fierce naval and air battles and a land campaign resulted in the deaths of 255 British and 649 Argentine soldiers, sailors and airmen, as well as 3 civilian Falklanders – from “friendly” fire. The Argentine forces surrendered on 14 June 1982. By 1981 the Thatcher government had become deeply

Photo: Tom Kl/Shutterstock.com



Rusting hardware, a relic of the 1982 war, beside

unpopular, but the chauvinism and phony nationalism of the Falklands War brought her an unlikely khaki election victory in 1983 that allowed her to go ahead with her vicious war against British workers' jobs, wages and unions.

After the war, Britain increased its military presence on the islands and constructed an airport, RAF Mount Pleasant, as cuts to the navy ruled out a repetition of another naval task force. Although Britain and Argentina resumed diplomatic relations in 1990, no further negotiations on sovereignty have taken place.

A sensible solution

The civilian governments of Argentina continue to assert that the Falkland Islands are Argentinian territory and will not relinquish their claim. Since 1994 it is even part of the Argentine Constitution, with patriotic sentiments enduring rather than ebbing away. In addition, the countries of Latin America have agreed to support a boycott of Falkland-flagged ships in their ports. The possibility of

om Britain, the
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e the road in Port Stanley.

finding oil fields in the area will only be a complicating factor and increase tensions further.

Britain's government needs to live in the real world and start reflecting the interests of over 60 million people actually living here – not just the nostalgia of 3000 posturing on some far-flung islands. Britain needs to live on amicable terms with Argentina and Latin America, a growing area for trade and development. Britain cannot continue to hide behind the dubious interpretation of the doctrines of "prescription" (that sovereignty of a territory can be established by peaceful occupation over a period of time) and "self-determination".

In effect, the Falklanders are a small group of introspective pariahs kept afloat by an expensive imperial lifeline. We should jettison this aspect of our colonial past. Negotiations with Argentina could still take place to create transitional arrangements, as we did in Hong Kong, that would protect the ability of the current Falklanders to live and prosper there, if they so wish. ■

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Founded in 1968, fresh and confident from the then revolutionary revival in the world, the CPBML was the special, dedicated creation of a group of industrial engineers led by our founding chairman, Reg Birch. From birth, our Party has had one unshakeable purpose – to change the thinking of the British working class – to secure the understanding that our survival with dignity is impossible under a declining capitalism, that only revolution and working class rule will assure work, peace, security – civilisation – for all.

We do not seek to instruct or command the working class. Workers are thinking beings who must be convinced themselves of the need for any course of action. Our party is of the working class, not a set of special people above it, external, doling out an alien theory. We attempt from the conditions of material existence to refine the strategic thinking of a working class and return it to its proper owners in pristine form. In our founder's metaphor, the working class is the seed, the communist party the fertiliser, enabling the class to flourish more expansively.

We are an unpaid, voluntary community of doers and thinkers with everyone expected to take responsibility and play a full part in developing the party. We attend regular meetings, we study together, we pay our financial commitments, we reflect on and analyse current affairs in Britain and the world, we develop a strategy and tactics that not only make sense of the predicaments we face in the world but also chart a way out of the mess. We produce our own publications, website and public meetings from the ideas we generate after collective exchange. Without rich or foreign backers, our financial resources are either self-generated or come from workers' donations.

We have democracy within our party with members always expected to think and contribute. Our highest authority is our three-yearly representative Party Congress, which sets out a direction for progress and elects a leadership to administer and safeguard our precious jewel. Discussion establishes the political line, but once established it is adhered to and embellished. We have no factions.

All party members are workers first and foremost, sharing the weal and woe of our class. We have no full-time professional revolutionaries and never will have. We operate on the willing, equal commitment of members.

Proud of our achievements over 44 years, we readily admit the greatest challenges lie ahead. We aim to grow and prosper in these difficult times.

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Back to Front – Wealth and money

‘The tone of Budget speeches and details might vary, but the problems of a capitalist economy don’t disappear with fine words...’

OSBORNE’S BUDGET on 21 March was about the creation of wealth, or rather the lack of it, and not about tax rates or income distribution. It purported to be for business and growth but was so devoid of any clue about how to make it happen that even his cheerleaders were laughing behind their hands at the “target of £1 trillion exports”.

But there’s little gain for workers in his discomfiture or even in the inevitable ultimate failure of the solutions offered to end recession.

The headlines were about reducing the top tax rate, partially fulfilling the Lib Dem “big idea” of increasing allowances but not for pensioners, and lowering the rate for companies too. Like all chancellors Osborne promised to stop tax avoidance – but without the means to do so.

The outrage from other politicians and commentators was contrived, falling into the “why don’t you take the money from someone else” trap so artfully set by this government from day one. HMRC will send out “personal” statements to tell people where their taxes are going. Their only purpose is to highlight spending on state benefits and to fuel resentment.

We pay income tax before we take wages home. Since the Second World War that’s been the dominant contribution to government funds. Goods and services we buy are taxed again. Even more so for the past 35 plus years through VAT, the tax favoured by the EU. A proportion of the profits we create for capitalists are also taxed, though not enough.

Tax avoidance is rightly condemned by movements like UK Uncut and unions representing government workers. But in the end it’s largely irrelevant that very wealthy individuals, high earners and company owners will pay less tax than they did before. Collecting more tax from those who can pay may ease some pressure but that alone will not prevent the destruction of public services put on the market or go very far to replace those we’ve lost or create jobs for young workers.

The reality is that there is little choice for this government or any other likely to be elected, even if you buy the tenuous argument that current levels of public debt demand extreme austerity. The tone of Budget speeches and details might vary, but the problems of a capitalist economy don’t disappear with fine words.

The symptoms are simply stated: unemployment, overwork for those who have jobs, poor or zero prospects for the young, lack of investment, a falling standard of living, recurrent financial crises and many needs unfulfilled. The result of fewer jobs is less tax for public spending and more to pay to those out of work. The answer is not to hope for another, more benevolent government.

There is only one real source of wealth and tax in the country – the working class, which produces through industry the goods and services we need. Capitalist governments both need and fear that productivity; it’s time we set the agenda about how we create real wealth for Britain, and how the wealth we create is used. ■

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