

WORKERS

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STAND UP FOR PAY



Local government No to division

08



Rail Propping up foreign governments

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Shipbuilding Revive Britain's yards

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WORKERS



Hands off the Middle East

PARLIAMENT DISGRACED itself when it voted in October, by 524 to 43, for another assault on stricken Iraq – “making the rubble bounce”, in the US Air Force’s unsavoury phrase.

MPs have now provided the justification for an attack on Syria, which they rejected in 2013. In the tragic chaos of the Middle East one thing is clear. We make the situation worse by our violent interference. Only the countries and peoples of the region, with goodwill, can solve their problems.

The former US representative to NATO, Kurt Volker, warns that drones nowadays “allow our opponents to cast our country as a distant, high-

tech, amoral purveyor of death. It builds resentment, facilitates terrorist recruitment and alienates those we should seek to inspire.”

The US-led invasion has rendered each part of Iraq unable to act with or for the whole due to the sectarianism sponsored by the invaders. Only the Iraqi people, not US and British bombs, can put that right – when eventually they tire of sectarianism.

In Syria, the US is conspiring with the “Free Syrian Army” with the aim of overthrowing Assad, the main object of sanctions. This provides direct and indirect support for the so-called “Islamic State”, the ostensible target. ■

We are changing

THIS JOURNAL is changing. In fact, the whole way the CPBML produces news is changing.

Our production of news will be strengthened with a regular electronic newsletter free to anyone who requests it.

We are backing this up with a new website, www.cpbml.org.uk, which will be regularly updated with articles and information about events (see On the Web, p4). Articles from past issues will still be held on www.workers.org.uk.

Workers is changing too, from 16 black-and-white pages 11 times a year to a 24-page full-colour bimonthly, appearing 6 times a year.

So this is the last monthly *Workers*. The first bimonthly *Workers* will appear at the start of January. As this is a reduction in frequency, the cost to subscribers will be reduced from £15 a year to £12. We would like to have reduced the cost even more, but had to cope with increases in print and postage for a larger issue. ■



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Midwives act on pay, staffing



Midwives march, 18 October.

ON MONDAY 13 October the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) struck for the first time in its long history – a four-hour stoppage between 7 am and 11 am that coincided with action by workers in nursing and paramedical services. Emergency cover was provided for women in labour but routine ante natal clinics were cancelled.

This action followed a ballot with a turnout of 49.4 per cent in which 82.2 per cent of members voted yes to striking. An even higher 94.6 per cent voted for action short of a strike. Midwives all across England mounted impressive pickets, and on many of these they were joined by mothers carrying their babies. Many messages of support came into the RCM headquarters and to individual picket lines, with the public showing good insight into the

current pressures facing the profession. The link between midwifery pay, staffing levels and safety of mothers and babies was well understood.

Further action started on Tuesday 14 October to highlight the shortage of midwives in England and how much the service relies on the goodwill of midwives doing unpaid overtime. The RCM stresses that members will only work paid overtime and is asking midwives to keep a timesheet of all paid overtime to show the extent of the current shortage.

The employer cannot claim “partial performance” as has been done in disputes involving university staff. The action simply asks the employer to pay the midwives for work over their contracted hours.

- On Friday 17 October NICE, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, published new recommendations for consultation that give advice on how hospitals should make the right staffing decisions for women and their babies. The irony of this has not been lost on the RCM.

Union head of policy Sean O’Sullivan said: “Our assessment is that 3,200 more midwives are needed in England to ensure that all women receive care that is both safe and of good quality. It is our hope that the guidance that emerges following this consultation will make a significant contribution to the elimination of this shortage, once and for all.”

But that would require a significantly expanded number of midwives in training. And even if the funding for that could be agreed, finding sufficient experienced midwifery teachers would be a challenge. The RCM action against unpaid overtime is a vital first step in ensuring there is a true assessment of the staffing need. ■

RAIL

SNP sells out to Dutch

THE SNP-LED administration in Scotland has awarded the contract to run ScotRail to Abellio, which is owned by Dutch state rail company NS.

Immediately after the referendum on Scottish separation, the general secretaries of the rail unions supported by MPs and MSPs seized upon the assurances that Scotland will be given powers to run its railways in the public sector if it wishes. They challenged the SNP-led administration to cancel the tendering process to avoid committing Scotland to a decade of “private” rail services.

The SNP showed its ideological commitment to the British government obsession with privatisation by promptly awarding the contract to Abellio, with the ink barely dry on the awarding of a contract for Anglo-Scottish sleeper train services to public service pariahs Serco.

This shows how the SNP looks on “independence” – it wants separation from Britain, but is happy to be beholden to the EU and a foreign state-owned rail company, and happy to have Scottish taxpayers paying towards investment in Dutch railways.

“There is no question that this whole franchising process could and should have been halted, pending the ratification of the post-referendum devolution settlement,” said RMT general secretary Mick Cash. “Scotland could have taken control of its own railways, instead they have opted to go Dutch, meaning that profits will be sucked out of the system to underpin investment and fares in Holland.”

RMT members may be wondering why their union backed separation in the recent referendum. ■

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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@cpbml.org.uk

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ON THE WEB

A selection of additional news at cpbml.org.uk...

Politics of Hong Kong protest

The “pro-democracy” demonstrators who have been sitting down in central areas of Hong Kong are for the return of Hong Kong as an independent capitalist statelet, severed from mainland China...

Union organisation and benefits

Chancellor Osborne told the Tory conference in Birmingham he will freeze working-age benefits if re-elected. The consequences ought to be a rise in trade union organisation...

More doublespeak over TTIP

On 9 October the European Union released the text of its “negotiating mandate” for the TTIP – the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership treaty that it is negotiating with the United States. Perhaps inadvertently, it includes one telling admission...

Midwife anger over private ads

Adverts for private care displayed at maternity units are outraging midwives. On the picket line at an east London hospital, one midwife explained why...

Workload ‘drives out’ teachers

Excessive workload has driven nine out of ten teachers to consider giving up teaching during the past two years, according to an online survey carried out by a teachers’ union...

Threat to bypass referendum

SNP leader Alex Salmond promised on 19 September to accept the referendum result and he urged Yes supporters to do the same. He at once broke this promise...

Working, but not enough

The number of underemployed in the workforce is increasing, according to a TUC analysis in September of the latest Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics...

The truth about young voters

Reports that 71 per cent of 16- to 17-year-olds voted Yes in the Scottish poll don’t stand up to scrutiny... ■

Fiasco in local government

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT workers’ pay “dispute” is now concluding a period of consultation, set to end on 12 November, on the employers’ changed pay proposals, not yet an offer but likely to be confirmed as such when the employers get their act together.

To date the pay negotiations affecting in the region of 1.5 million workers have reflected a bad farce, set in Ruritania, with chorus cries of the best from British pantomime overseen by that strategist the Grand Old Duke of York.



Workers

An initial 14 per cent pay claim has been effectively reduced to a mere £1 an hour tied to the so-called living wage. There has been no engagement with the employers after they rejected the initial claim. Unison’s democratic structure and pay strategy, if one can call it a strategy, kicked into operation with a national strike ballot.

The turnout was in the region of 15 per cent, with a slender majority voting yes. Unison refused to publish the turn-out figure. The employer said it was 6 per cent aggregated across the unions balloting – a figure never contradicted by the unions involved.

Ignoring the turnout Unison’s allegedly lay-led democracy

clamoured for strike action. The GMB and Unite as minority players in local government followed in Unison’s slipstream. A national strike on 10 July 2014 was widely acknowledged as a fiasco by all except the ultra-left.

In many areas brilliant application of “smoke and mirrors” by union organisers made the strike appear more successful than it was. Flags and banners masked members crossing picket lines. But teachers in the NUT were also on strike, closing myriad schools and hiding the ineffectiveness of the action in town halls and local government functions, which continued without major disruption.

Unison then announced two further strike days for September, which led to a fundamental split between Unison, the GMB and Unite. The two days were withdrawn and a united position of a further strike on 14 October was announced. Then the negotiators started talking. There was effectively no real change around the “proposal” (not a formal offer) of around 1 per cent.

The date for payment slipped, which meant it could be interpreted as a 2 per cent offer or more if a settlement date of 1 January 2015 is applied, as opposed to the original February 2014 claim date. So consultation over the proposal got under way with union members having to get their heads round various strategies. Consultation, to the fury of the ultra-left, led to the deferral of the 14 October strike day.

Local government workers now have to consider accepting the offer and going away to think through how they got themselves into such a tactical dead-end. Rejection means a commitment to all-out industrial action, which is a non-starter as the unions couldn’t even deliver a one-day stoppage. Instead, workers have to think through how sections of the three largest unions, by not having genuine member participation, have allowed themselves to be locked into such a mess.

It’s a car crash, hijacked by the ultra left who delight in trying to worsen it, splinter the trade unions and promote yet again more so-called rank-and-file red trade unionism. It is no accident that the in Unison they are clamouring for the election date for the general secretary’s post to be set in 2015, so that the hat of their favoured armchair general of this flop can be thrown into the ring.

The three major local government unions, Unison, GMB and Unite, have painted themselves into a corner. Rhetoric has replaced thinking, mechanistic tactics have replaced strategy. The foundations of the pay strategy have been built on sand.

The need now is to retreat, regroup and preserve the ability of the unions to function rather than be destroyed by gesture tactics and posturing. Unison must take responsibility for this failure of strategy, but must be applauded for showing real leadership in trying to extract the local government unions from the quagmire they are floundering in. ■

PROPERTY

The vultures gather

BRITAIN'S LARGEST gathering of property developers, financiers, health trusts, local authorities, estate agents, bankers, landlords, politicians, speculators et al has been networking, partying, carving up Britain's assets at the MIPIM Real Estate Investors summit held at Olympia on 15-17 October 2014.

This international feast of property

speculators, which moves around the world, was visiting London for the first time. An estimated 20,000 visitors at hundreds of exhibitions, all graced by the keynote welcome from Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, heard about every aspect of property and land speculation in Britain.

Exhibitors ranged from local authorities touting for redevelopment, to the builders of Crossrail, foreign investors and those promoting social cleansing in Britain's cities, especially in London. As

the capital becomes the residence of choice for the rich and super-rich, clearing out those poor dirty workers is paramount.

Added to that is the targeting of national assets. The NHS figures significantly in the presentations, with an estate base valued at £3 billion and an estimated £50 million target for land and estate sales in London.

NHS land sales in London alone could create 250,000 new homes. – although they are unlikely to be affordable by ordinary Londoners. ■

New threat to steel plants



Steelworkers' banner on the TUC's pay march, London, 18 October 2014.

STEEL WORKERS in Britain once again find their jobs threatened after Tata Steel announced on 15 October plans to sell its Long Products Division to the predatory Swiss-based Klesch Group.

The plants affected include a steelworks in Scunthorpe, mills in Teesside, and Dalzell and Clydebridge in Scotland. An engineering workshop in Workington and a rail consultancy in York are also in the firing line. A total of 6,500 jobs are

threatened, in addition to the 400 lost at the Port Talbot plant earlier this year.

Tata has been cutting back on its workforce in Britain for years. Always referred to as "restructuring", this has included the closure of its construction products business at Newport, and the mothballing of the hot strip mill at Llanwern.

Tata continues to expand worldwide. But that's only in relatively low wage areas like India, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Iran, at the expense of its British and other European operations.

The Klesch Group is known as a vulture on the industrial scene. It does not manufacture. It buys and sells, focusing on buying up debt from struggling firms and selling it on. Klesch has immediately announced there will be no guarantees about job numbers or security when it takes over.

Rubbing salt into the wound, Business Secretary Vince Cable limply remarked, "The next few months will be a time of uncertainty for the company and employees. The proposed sale shows the harsh reality of trading conditions in parts of the steel industry." The other harsh reality is that the government continues to wash its hands of British industry. The workers involved and their unions will have to get their thinking caps on if they are to resist this relentless assault. No one will, or can, do it for them. ■

ARTS

National Gallery strike

STAFF AT the National Gallery in London held a 24-hour strike on 15 October, the opening day of the blockbuster Rembrandt exhibition.

But the main purpose was to draw attention to the low pay of gallery and museum staff working in the public sector, and to the proposed contracting out of information, ticketing and security to companies such as G4S and Serco.

Galleries have had their funding cut, yet the number of visitors has increased - 6 million a year at the gallery. They are forced to diversify into retail and other commercial activities, rather than investing in the cultural core of their work.

The PCS union says 400 out of 600 jobs there are due to go or be replaced; management says it needs more "flexibility" – in other words, a lower wages bill and less trade union scrutiny.

Under pressure, management has agreed to new talks, though an agreement may be several months away. ■

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

NOVEMBER

Saturday 15 November, 11 am to 5 pm
Trades Union Congress, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1R 4RL

The Big TUC Youth Debate: Jobs, Homes and Voice

Organised by the TUC Young Workers Forum and the National Union of Students. "A decent job, access to quality housing and a voice and representation at work, and beyond, are things that young people are entitled to expect rather than just hope for," says the TUC, though event publicity seems to stress voting rather than action.

Entry is free, but by ticket only. A link to get tickets can be found at <http://www.tuc.org.uk/events/big-tuc-youth-debate>, along with further information about the event.



Workers on the Web

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



Unison general secretary Dave Prentis (centre) joins picketing ambulance staff in London.

Unity blunts provocation

THE FIRST STRIKES in the NHS for 32 years on Monday 13 October gave the lie to the idea that trade unions don't matter – especially in the London Ambulance Service.

Unison had agreed a "life & limb" policy with ambulance management designed to keep Londoners safe by arranging emergency cover to be deployed from picket lines. Despite this, news leaked out the Friday before that almost 200 soldiers, sailors, air force personnel and police would be used in place of ambulance workers during the strike.

Over the weekend Unison worked hard to avoid the provocation that the government clearly intended. The union would have been entitled to withdraw from the agreement. But that would have been used by Downing Street in its campaign to criminalise union activity, and ultimately members, in the emergency services.

In the event the union's emergency plans worked, with many examples of crews deploying from picket lines to save lives. In contrast stories abounded of ambulances crewed by soldiers being unable to cope with trauma patients, and groups of training managers refusing en bloc to be driven to jobs by squaddies.

The strength of confidence of the workers involved has been enhanced, and the union has faced down the might of the state. But only for now. Organised workers showed their power by keeping their eyes on the real enemy, the government, and not being tricked into leaving Londoners to die. For workers to win the pay rise they seek, more action, careful and considered as well as bold, will be needed.

• You can find a fuller version of this article on www.cpbml.org.uk ■

By the end of the ne
regardless of who is

The NHS



Demonstration during the fight to save Lewisham

NHS STRIKE Hospital news

IT IS A reflection of the discipline and loyalty of health workers to their unions that despite the low ballot turnout they struck and held out in the face of adversity. But reports reaching *Workers* from south London show a move towards reflecting hard on whether tactics short of strike action such as overtime bans, lunchtime protests, demonstrations, or selective strikes, or striking at different times of the day, can more effectively build a head of steam around pay.

Workers at Princess Royal University Hospital in Bromley south London maintained a lively picket line during the 13 October strike despite the rain. Picket numbers varied between 15 and 25 during the four-hour stoppage, mainly comprising Unison and RCM members with the occasional GMB member and no Unite.

Public support was amazing, with cars and buses sounding their horns in support, despite Bromley's image as a Tory fiefdom. Sadly the numbers voting in the ballot reflected those actively participating in the

strike. Yet union banners were unfurled, and veterans who had participated in the last NHS strikes in 1982 were joined by new workers who hadn't even been born then.

Getting the experience of having organised and been on strike was good. It is another question as to whether a further strike will be delivered without much work to build the awareness and consciousness of health workers. But the campaign to "take your break" was supported during the rest of the week.

Stalwarts at Lewisham Hospital heroically faced four hours of torrential rain to ensure the picket line was staffed in support of the strike.

Yet truth be told, there was minuscule support from hospital workers. On more than one occasion the picket was swamped by professional well-wishers, advisers on industrial action more used to their armchairs and various other odds-and-ends organisations. Unison and Royal College of Midwives strikers had to reclaim the picket for its real purpose – a strike on pay – as opposed to those who just wanted to swop each other's soggy newspapers. ■

AT THE Conservative Party Conference the Prime Minister David Cameron declared his commitment to the National Health Service saying that no one could believe he would put other people's children at risk. The truth is that he and his class are doing just that to the NHS.

Soon after that speech a letter in *The Independent* from senior doctors, nurses and midwives described the NHS as buckling to the extent that its founding principles are at stake. They described how hospitals are at breaking point and that the funding restraints under the coalition are unprecedented in the 66-year history of the NHS. There is a projected funding shortfall of £30 billion by 2020.

Waiting times

Elective surgery and cancer targets are being missed. For example in the north of England, the waiting time for elective orthopaedic surgery is now three months on average, compared to just over four weeks in 2010. In some parts of the country the 18-week cancer waiting time target, which was almost universally met in 2010, can now be as long as 30 weeks.

Cameron lost his son Ivan early in his tenure; a devastating blow for any family.

Next parliament the NHS could become a thing of the past, as elected. Only workers can save it...

NHS: unsafe in their hands



at a hospital, south London, February 2012.

He paid tribute to the NHS for its support and cited this as evidence of his commitment to the service. It is one thing for a multimillionaire to deal with the consequences of having a severely disabled child and quite another for someone living without his privileges, in a small house or flat on average wages. In 2014 to parents who find themselves in that predicament would not share the prime minister's experience of health, social care and respite services.

There is no effective integration in Britain between hospital and social care. For the most part social care is privatised. In some areas of the country it is not available at all from a provider capable of meeting Care Quality Commission standards.

The 2010 Conservative Party manifesto gave an unequivocal commitment that

'Since 2010 there has effectively been no national centralised workforce planning.'

there would be no further "top-down" reorganisation of the NHS. Yet we got the Health and Social Care Act 2012 a massive top-down reorganisation which further opened the service up to the private sector.

Under pressure from health service unions and the rest of our class, annual spending on the NHS the Labour government had increased spending (though also, for example, had introduced clinical commissioning groups). Britain reached the rank of third in the OECD league table of per capita spending on health behind only Germany and France. We have now slipped to 11th.

In Scotland the Health and Social Care Act has not been implemented. Nursing care in the community is free of charge and properly integrated with hospital, residential and respite services. There are no prescription charges and no tuition fees – enabling medical and nursing education to be properly planned.

Pressures

The NHS has been nominally protected from expenditure cuts, but the revenue uplifts take no account of inflation or the cost pressure from an ageing population. Yet the service has undergone a cost-improvement programme (QIPP) which achieved an underspend of around £2.5 billion in 2013-14. It's not evident that any of this has been returned to the service. Capital investment and expenditure on modernisation is lower in 2013-14 than it was in 2009-10.

The lives of NHS workers have been directly attacked too. Since 2010 pay has either been frozen or at best has risen at 1 per cent below inflation: a cumulative pay cut of around 6 per cent. The final salary pension scheme, defined as deferred wages when setting it up in 1948, has been wound up. Pension contributions have significantly increased, disproportionate to any demographic pressure. The average hospital consultant is paying £1,400 a month into a pension scheme predicted to be in surplus by around £2.5 billion in 2018. This represents a significant and unprecedented attack on the material and social wages of those who deliver care to our people.

Cameron and his health secretary James Hunt are proud of what they've done. Hunt claims that there are 6,500 more doctors, 3,500 more nurses and 3,000 more midwives in the NHS since his government came to power. It's not possible to validate these by reference to the relevant professional registers. Midwives claim that Hunt has reneged on his promise to expand the profession. No doubt that was one element behind their decision to strike for the first time on 13 October.

For GPs in particular there is an impending manpower crisis due to an ageing professional population and loss of posts. Any proposal to expand their numbers just marginally will inevitably result in a diminishing number of qualified doctors working as GPs, exhorted beyond their capacity and competence to deliver a primary care-led NHS.

Since 2010 there has effectively been no national centralised workforce planning. Cameron claims that there are 5,000 more GPs in the pipeline and a further 8,000 will be recruited by 2020. But it takes eight years to train a GP – five years in medical school, then house officer rotation followed by practical accreditation and training. Even if a planned medical school expansion was implemented in 2015 the necessary number of qualified doctors would not be available until 2022 at the earliest.

Cameron promised 7-day access to a named GP by 2020 and claims to have set aside £400 million for the purpose. That is undeliverable without a significant expansion of GPs and associated professional and health and social care staff. None of that has been either scoped or costed. Perhaps he's hoping no-one will remember the pledge.

As usual in the run-up to a general election, political parties spray promises around like confetti. Labour is pledging to repeal the Health and Social Care Act. Believe it when you see it – that's the same Labour that pledged in 1997 to put an end to the internal market in the NHS.

The risk is that by the end of the next parliament the NHS and national integrated health care will be consigned to the past. Only our class can reverse that, without trusting any parliamentary party. ■

The Scottish referendum stimulated local authorities in England to look to their own version of fragmentation...

We need a national plan, not division

THE SCOTTISH independence referendum has focused the attention of local authorities in England on moving towards their own version of fragmentation.

The government has a strategic view of the world that would roll back the concept of the state to a level equivalent to medieval times. It is based on the ideas of Hayek and Friedman that inspired Thatcher. None of this mumbo jumbo is challenged by local authorities, irrespective of their alleged party political stance. Instead they all embrace it in differing degrees.

Gone forever is the great municipalisation of the Victorian capitalists. They took great pride in constructing their cities – Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and others – with efficient public services. The provision of water, gas, electricity, public health, housing, education, museums and parks epitomised that civic pride.

The past 40 years have seen municipalisation set aside. Nearly every public, civic and local provision has been stripped out and either privatised or removed. This is starkly shown by the closure of over 500 libraries out of 3,000 in the past four years. With it goes the systematic looting and selling off of local museum treasures to fund ever-declining local government.

The same premise

There are several seemingly different strategies to address local or regional decline. But all are wedded to the government's premise that the cost of public provision is unaffordable. And so in practice all accept there is no alternative to the government's economic strategies.

The City Centred Campaign in England comprises the Core Cities group of local authorities, the London Councils group and the Mayor of London. All argue for the separation of local government from central government. They do not go as far as using that separation of powers to argue for local versus federal government, but that is the direction they are moving in.

The desperation of local and regional

politicians is reflected in the range of fantasies they put forward. These include the resurrection of regionalism, mini-regions within regions, shared services across regions, city states and alliances of cities, and the re-creation of pre-Norman Conquest legislative boundaries. All of them cringingly doff their caps to the European Union when dreaming up these ideas.

'The parallel is with the 1980s, when Labour MPs, and shamefully some trade unions, believed they could not defeat Thatcher at home.'

The government implements a strategy emanating from the EU, which compounds previous EU strategies to obliterate Britain's historic core industrial base of coal, steel, manufacturing, fishing, textiles and so on. The impact of this destruction and the wiping out of our regional industrial heartlands is there for all to see. Yet local and regional politicians do not grasp why they are surrounded by such destruction; they actually ask for more.

The belief that greater localism or greater regionalism will somehow lead to a new prosperity is a massive delusion. Even Cameron has dropped that mantra. It can't resolve the disintegration which has been running across Britain for the past 30 years. Britain's regions were connected by their industrial sinews. The industrial sinews created Britain. Dismember the sinews and the regions collapse.

There are other examples of parish pump thinking besides the faction arguing for their local fiefdoms. These take the path to an even smaller fragmented localism. One local authority for example will argue for mutualisation. Another will argue for municipalisation.

What is mutualisation? This is a dream child of Co-op ideologues, probably long-gone or sacked in the recent Co-op Group debacle. They argued that rather than privatise and outsource, a local authority should provide public services by creating a series of workers' cooperatives, mutual and social enterprises.

But co-ops go bust, mutuals transform themselves into shareholder-owned companies and social enterprises get taken over. The reality of mutualisation is that it results in privatisation.

What is municipalisation? You take all services provided by the local authority, break them down into discrete business units and put them out to contract. There is an apparently clever quasi-socialist contract that only those based in the borough can bid for or run these municipal companies. As the council leader or mayor you claim this is a wonderful initiative for local job creation and a boost for local and preferably small businesses. You hope that it results in the local authority being re-elected by an ever-grateful local electorate. The reality is that municipalisation results in privatisation.

Contracting out

Another local authority will not bother with smart ideas. It will cut straight to the heart of the matter and put all its services directly out to contract, becoming a Tory flagship for privatisation. The electorate responded: These flagship boroughs were sunk with a colossal casualty rate in the 2014 local elections. But their contracts were set up with a poison pill. It will take years before they can be re-negotiated or brought back in-house. By that time the electorate will be yet further disengaged and disillusioned with local politics.



Bereft of a unified concept of planning which links local and national needs, our cities are losing their way.

Other local authorities will establish their arm's-length trading companies hoping to generate revenue and enter the market as a rival to either each other or established multinationals. The arm's-length companies then go on a journey to becoming fully fledged independent companies.

Sometimes they might have a slender link to the originating authority but more often than not they are cast adrift. Shared services will be widely promoted for economies of scale. Local authorities will become more like regional or county government. Arm's-length companies and shared services also result in privatisation.

The Local Government (Independence) Bill is before Parliament at present as a Private Member's Bill introduced by Graham Allen, Labour MP for Nottingham North. Essentially this Bill would permanently separate local government from central government. It tries to do what Parliament has always resisted accepting into European Union treaties: to agree to a law binding forever on future generations.

Local politicians across the political divide are so desperate that they try to hide in a legislative solution instead of addressing the key question of taking responsibility locally.

The parallel is with the 1980s, when Labour MPs, and shamefully some trade unions, believed they could not defeat Thatcher at home. Instead they looked to winning MEP seats and imposing EU legislation from afar to resolve the internal problems at home. The move failed; it only assisted those wishing to entrench EU regulations and directives.

The question should be posed: what is the root cause of the contradictions between local government and central government? What takes priority – localism or national interest? What is localism? Where does the parish pump politic stop and the 'not in my backyard' attitude start? Whose interests do national and local government reflect? In Victorian times there was the perceived glory of local civic duty and pride. But that appeared so only because of industrial manufacturing industries creating local wealth that could be deployed through philanthropy, do-gooding or deeply guilty consciences.

Neo-liberalism

The present central government is wedded to European Union neo-liberal Thatcherite politics and economics. So was its predecessor, and every other government dating back to Heath in 1970. It will attack all alternative power in Britain which does not follow its agenda. This government will and does create division, separatism, regionalism and fragmentation. Divide and rule is the easiest way to win, shatter the opposition, buy the opposition, or divert the opposition.

Over and over again sectarianism, selfishness and short-sighted narrow mindedness are promoted under the banner of localism, regionalism or independence. These are the tried and tested ways for the politics of displacement to throw up this mayor, that MP, or the other local council leader and to distract from the reality: local and central government need thorough reform.

Mere reform will not resolve the artificial divide between local and central government. There has to be a fundamental revolution in thought, analysis and structure on this question. We should address not one or two structural failures of British society but must look at all infrastructure and inter-connection of workers' needs in modern Britain.

Once you accept the concept that the role of the state is not to turn the clock back to the 16th century but to provide the infrastructure of the state that workers would require, then you need to define what those core requirements are.

Everyone jumps to the defence of the National Health Service. We should demand the same for all other core national services. There is the need for a national plan to address Britain's evolution in the 21st century.

For example, establish and implement an infrastructure construction plan to resolve Britain's road, rail, transport, airport and port requirements. Establish and implement a national energy plan to address all energy reserves and provision: coal, gas, and electricity generation, nuclear construction and so on. Establish a national house building strategy – to link homes and industry. Plan how to reconstruct regional industrial sinews, the communication links for localised needs.

These are just a few examples of what the creation of a national plan linked to local needs could do to revolutionise work, planning and democratic control – to make the left hand (local government) applaud with the right hand (central government). ■

More than two-thirds of Britain's rail network is now run by not just by Westminster, but the false nationalists in Holyrood

Rail: we're propping up

RAIL UNION RMT has highlighted that 20 of Britain's 27 so-called private passenger rail contracts are run by foreign state-owned railways – mainly from France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Germany is the biggest of these. Its state-owned Deutsche Bahn (DB) runs Cross Country, Chiltern and Arriva as well as the Tyne & Wear metro, and holds a half share in London Overground. RMT exposed the British government's agenda by quoting a German transport ministry spokesperson who said, "We are skimming profit from the entire Deutsche Bahn and ensuring that it is anchored in our budget – that way we can make sure it is invested in the rail network here in Germany".

In other words, DB receives massive subsidies from British taxpayers, makes massive profits, and is completely open about investing those profits in Germany's railways.

Subsidising Germany

Mick Cash, RMT's newly elected general secretary following the death of Bob Crow, said, "The true scale of the way the railways here in Britain are being used as a cash-cow to hold down fares and improve services across the rest of Europe will shock passengers as they prepare for another week of being crammed into creaking cattle trucks while being bled dry when they pay for their ticket.

"With the planned reprivatisation of the East Coast Mainline by this rotten Government we are rapidly heading towards a situation where almost the entire

"The railways here in Britain are being used as a cash-cow to hold down fares and improve services across the rest of Europe."



Workers

An East Coast train stops at Leeds.

train operation in Britain is in the hands of overseas companies sucking out profits to benefit their own domestic transport services."

RMT exposed this scandal following the recent announcement that yet another franchise, in this case ScotRail, would be run by Abellio from 1 April 2015. Abellio is owned by NS, the Dutch state rail company. RMT noted that NS will soon run a rail network in Britain that is two-and-a-half times bigger than the one in the Netherlands! (See News article, p3.)

RMT also highlighted that the British government and now the SNP so-called Scottish government are happy for Britain's railways to be state owned as long as it is by any state but Britain. They pointed out that the British state-owned operator of East Coast was not allowed to bid for ScotRail, or come to that for the new East Coast franchise, the winner of which will be

announced shortly.

Eurostar, the international passenger operator running services through the Channel Tunnel, has joined with Keolis as one of three bidders shortlisted for the franchise. Keolis is 70 per cent owned by SNCF, the French state railway. The other bidders are a joint Virgin/Stagecoach bid, and the hapless FirstGroup. FirstGroup is rapidly losing ground to foreign operators; it has just handed Thameslink services through London to a SNCF-led company, and is now to lose ScotRail to the Dutch.

On 14 October, the British government announced the planned sale of its large stake in Eurostar. RMT said that "this compounds the issue of foreign ownership of Britain's railways as the French state (who own most of the rest of Eurostar) have first refusal on our slice of the highly profitable Eurostar cake. The French and Belgians think we are insane knocking off such a

by foreign state-owned companies – handed over to them
 good as well...

to foreign governments

valuable and strategic infrastructure asset.”

If SNCF exercises its right to buy out Britain’s stake in Eurostar and win the East Coast franchise, it will control key passenger services from Marseilles all the way to Inverness!

TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady said “Eurostar has thrived under public ownership, returning millions in profits each year to the Treasury. However, now it too has become a victim of the government’s ‘private works best’ market dogma.

“Privatisation has been a disaster for the UK’s railways. Train firms rely upon public subsidies to turn a profit, virtually all of which ends up in shareholders’ pockets, rather than being re-invested back into the network.

“By choosing to ignore this evidence ministers are once again putting the interests of private companies and shareholders before those of passengers and taxpayers.”

The same is true of East Coast, currently the most profitable of the passenger franchises.

More peak fares

The British government has also found a new way to rip-off rail users already paying high fares. NS and Serco jointly own Northern Trains which operates local services across the north of England, around Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull, York and Newcastle. The company was recently instructed to introduce peak fares for the evening peak period as well as the morning peak, with some users facing increases for journeys of more than double the previous fare as a result.

The new part of this move is the fact that until now, a cheap off-peak fare is valid for train journeys so long as the whole journey is scheduled to begin before or after the peak period, including any changes in trains.

Under the new Northern arrangements you can still set off with a valid ticket up to one minute before the evening peak period. But if you then change trains, your off-peak ticket is no longer valid and you will be hit with what could be a big surcharge up to the peak fare. It gives a whole new meaning to the peak fare. It gives a whole new meaning to Peaky Blinders!

Foreign private companies are not

“We are skimming profit from the entire Deutsche Bahn [...to invest in] the rail network here in Germany.”

missing out on milking of Britain’s railways for profit either. Those profits are only possible because of huge public subsidies injected by Britain’s taxpayers. The subsidies are now many times more in real terms than were received by publicly-owned British Rail.

That most profitable part of Britain’s privatised railways, the three rolling stock leasing companies, are very much favoured by foreign investors. Is it any wonder? These companies represent the most scandalous aspect of rail privatisation; they have made embarrassingly huge profits out of what were state-owned assets in a story akin to Russian oligarchs!

In 2009, the rail regulator called in the Competition Commission to look into whether these companies were overcharging operators to lease trains. The commission concluded that the three companies could have cost the taxpayer as much as £100 million a year. It blamed the structure of the rail franchising system and the John Major government for selling the companies far too cheaply at the time of privatisation.

Even London mayor Boris Johnson realised the complete rip-off these companies represent, choosing to order trains for London’s new Crossrail services through the public purse by ordering them directly from the manufacturers.

These companies, originally British-owned, keep changing hands amongst international speculators. Porterbrook has just been sold by a consortium owned by Deutsche Bank and funds OPTrust and Antin Infrastructure. The new owners are another consortium, principally Australian company Hastings, and Canada’s Alberta

Investment Management Corporation, two investment companies whose clients can clearly see how easy it is to make huge profits at British taxpayers’ expense.

Notably, the other main player in the new owning consortium is EDF Invest – owned largely by (you guessed it) the French state!

Rail unions continue to be concerned about the fact that the profit motive coupled with cut backs in state-owned rail infrastructure company Network Rail will compromise rail safety.

Last October, a freight train was derailed in Camden, London, with container wagons perched precariously on top of a viaduct in a very busy part of the capital. The railway is shared with the London Overground train service. Only luck averted a major disaster and significant loss of life.

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) has just reported its findings, blaming a series of failures and operational issues which had been raised repeatedly by rail unions, including poor and deteriorating track condition, and a failure to meet key maintenance schedules and thresholds for taking corrective action. Similar issues had been raised by the RAIB in a recent report into the derailment of a freight train near Gloucester, also occurring last October. Unions blamed Network Rail’s cuts to maintenance and staffing.

The current state of Britain’s railways is becoming a growing political issue. Both TSSA and ASLEF have been pinning their hopes on the Labour Party pledging to return the railways to public ownership as part of their manifesto for the 2015 General Election.

But Miliband and Balls have been desperately trying to avoid giving any such commitments. The result has been an unworkable fudge, with Labour now saying that it will allow the Britain’s state-owned rail operator, East Coast Mainline, to compete for franchises.

Such an approach will do nothing to change a completely discredited system. The demand from all rail workers and their unions must be for Britain’s railways to be owned and run for the benefit of Britain’s people, not for the benefit of foreign governments or private shareholders. ■

The defeat of separatism in the referendum has spurred so
remains: how to rebuild a vital industry laid waste by deca

The fight to revive British

THE VOTE FOR unity in the recent referendum has to be the “key in the ignition” for the rebuilding of Britain. What industry could benefit most from the Britain-wide effort that should result? With its integrated supply lines, complex cooperation and wide skills base, that would be our long established and struggling shipbuilding industry.

Over the past four decades shipbuilding has suffered major rationalisation, consolidation and mergers. The period has witnessed the almost complete decline of the commercial shipbuilding sector. With the focus on cutting edge, highly technical advanced vessels and equipment for the naval defence sector, the industry’s scope for export has been greatly limited.

What could have been a major and positive response from the workers in the industry – the work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in 1971/72 and the occupation of Robb Caledon in Dundee – was diverted into separatism (in the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, for example). Now that trend has been reversed. Once again the fight can be waged for a revived and integrated shipbuilding industry on a truly British scale.

The scourge of deindustrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s and the implementation of the European Structural Funds (including the European Social Fund made) the commercial industry in Britain redundant. The contracts went instead to countries in Europe which subsidised their shipbuilding with the help of these structural funds.

Globalisation and the expansion of major shipbuilding capabilities in the emerging economies of South Korea, China and India excluded large scale shipbuilding – high tonnage cargo vessels, cruise liners, oil tankers – from Britain. Even the naval defence sector began to suffer a sustained period of instability as Britain’s Defence Industrial Strategy fell by the wayside, and

‘It is far from clear as to how a move to 7-day working will be funded.’



BAE Systems

Moving a giant section of hull at BAE’s Govan yard on the Clyde: a complex and demanding engineering task

naval procurement seemed to fall into chaos.

Uncertainties surrounding the lack of fit-for-purpose equipment have plagued workers, the industry and naval defence sectors alike. Now there is a chance to restore the industry to its once unassailable position as the jewel in the crown of British industry. Within our threatened manufacturing industry, shipbuilding is a showcase of excellence in technological advance. It is, moreover, essential to have it soundly-based and enhanced as a guarantee of sovereignty.

Skills

A highly skilled shipbuilding workforce still exists and it is this body of workers that we must secure and enhance. The industry employs around 25,000 people directly – with a further 30,000 in the supply chain and providing other services to the industry.

It is an industry that has not neglected its responsibilities to train and develop apprentice schemes, and their high levels of skills are renowned worldwide. BAE Systems on the Clyde has trained on average 95 apprentices per year since 2003.

Apprentices appeared at the forefront of the trade union “No to separatism – for working class unity” campaign (see *Workers*, October issue).

Arguing for a greater recognition of these skills and their retention, and for pay and conditions to match – as well as securing and enhancing their industry – is a task that these workers have now taken on in a more urgent way. Unions that represent them have launched campaigns to pursue these aims.

Earlier this year the Unite union launched “Navigating Excellence – A Unite strategy for driving growth in the maritime industry in the UK”. Drawn up by Ian Waddell, Unite’s National Officer for Aerospace & Shipbuilding, and Janet Golds, Research Officer for Manufacturing, it recommends a way forward for the success of the industry. It highlights the unacceptable levels of waste and mismanagement at the heart of delays and over-spending on major defence contracts. The workforce bears the brunt of such mistakes through poor pay and job losses.

The report calls for a policy of building

Some regeneration in Scottish shipyards. But the challenge
 of contraction...

British shipbuilding



Engineering environment.

in Britain, showing examples of large vessels being constructed abroad because of “cheapest bid wins the contract” rules. Interaction between the component parts of the industry – for example collaboration on skills and secondment instead of redundancy – are being looked at by the union.

A Britain-wide industry

The Britain-wide nature of the industry is best seen in submarine construction. The core workforce is at Barrow-in-Furness; Rolls-Royce is the main supplier; the vessels are based and maintained at HM Naval Base Clyde; Devonport backs up the operation. Another example is the “aircraft carrier alliance”. Sites run by Thales, Babcock, BAE Systems and the Ministry of Defence work together all across Britain.

Starting in 2016, a decade of work will begin on 13 Type 26 Frigates by BAE Systems Maritime Submarines at Barrow-in-Furness. And BAE Systems on the Clyde at Govan has now embarked on the £350 million contract for offshore patrol vessels, securing over 800 jobs. The contract was confirmed and signed following the “No”

vote against separation in September.

Another revival following this positive vote was that of the Ferguson Shipyard in Port Glasgow on the upper Clyde. Back in September 2005 *Workers* wrote that “despite losing half its workforce in the past year, Ferguson is determined to survive”. This followed a campaign rally in the town to save the yard, and news that the then Scottish Executive was awarding contracts, under EU rules, to a Polish company in Gdansk instead of to Ferguson. That company was under investigation for illegal subsidies and using cheap labour from Russia.

Ferguson eventually closed, but is now re-opened – with orders from Caledonian Maritime Assets for two 100-metre ferries. This revival of the last non-naval commercial shipbuilder in Scotland is in no small measure related to the increased confidence engendered by the decisive support for unity. The new company will be named Ferguson Marine Engineering, with the prospect of its 77 restored jobs rising to 300 within three years. Owner Jim McColl criticised government for not countering the severe difficulties such companies have in raising bonds to finance recovery.

The name of the new company is a clue to its potential to diversify – essential when orders for ships are few. The spread of skills would include the ability to build specialist ships for the offshore oil and gas industry, offshore wind farms and seabed holding frames for tidal energy devices.

An increasing market for ships was predicted, with fleets in Europe and further afield reaching the end of their useful life. Although it would be very hard to compete with Korean and Chinese yards for the building of large ships, acquiring the ability to construct 120-metre vessels would be feasible – making the yard one of only three similar companies in Britain.

Diversifying to survive

As drilling in ever deeper waters around Britain proceeds, the need for maritime construction increases. This means work for the diversified activities of shipyards, securing their future and skills.

An example is the just announced Cygnus gas project, a scheme which will add £1.29 billion to the British economy

and require over 4,800 skilled jobs during its five-year construction period. This is the result of Britain’s largest gas field discovery in the past 25 years. Scotland and the north east of England will see 19,000 tonnes of offshore infrastructure being built at yards in Fife, Scottish Highlands and Hartlepool.

A prime example of skills diversification is found in the north west of England at the Cammell Laird company. Although it specialises in commercial ship repair, naval refits, shipbuilding and conversion, it is now rapidly expanding in cutting edge engineering services.

Cammells has become a hub for onshore infrastructure for the offshore wind energy industry, the civil nuclear energy sector, petrochemicals and heavy fabrication work. Founded in 1828 on the River Mersey, Cammells now fills 130 acres with four dry docks, large construction halls and workshops.

A north east England example is Pallion Shipyard, set up over 100 years ago on the Wear in Sunderland. Its potential covers ship repair, new build and conversion – and projects for civil engineering, steel fabrication and the offshore oil and gas industry.

A unique facility is found at Invergordon, Britain’s deepest sheltered bay and the site of a famous Navy mutiny, where entire fleets were anchored. Today it is the main facility for oil and gas rig projects – the Invergordon Service Base, operated by the Scottish Cromarty Firth Port Authority.

Invergordon serves as an arrival point for giant rigs destined for service drilling wells at high pressures and temperatures up to 35,000 feet down – in water up to 400 feet deep. In August a new rig arrived having refuelled in Falmouth after a two-month journey from its construction site in Shanghai. It had been transported by a semi-submersible vessel The Black Marlin from the Waigaoqiao Shipbuilding Company. Can we build them here?

The Unite union’s analysis on behalf of its members is a start. Another is the example set by the north west England based Keep Our Future Afloat Campaign (KOFAC) led by trade unions in the shipbuilding industry and its supply chain network of over 1500 companies. British shipbuilding is starting to be rebuilt. It’s due for a revival. ■

Thatcher did not start the roll back of postwar nationalisation. Unease at state control of the British economy surfaced as

When Britain ran its roads

THE RAILWAYS weren't the only transport industry nationalised after World War Two. Radical changes took place in transport as well. Long-distance road haulage, bus companies, canals and shipping ports were acquired by the state under the Transport Act 1947. Also taken over were the Thomas Cook travel agency, and the collections that became the National Railway Museum in York and the London Transport Museum in Covent Garden.

Planning and control had helped Britain win the war, and they were to help the reconstruction as well. All these transport modes were handed over to a new British Transport Commission, which was responsible to the Ministry of Transport for general transport policy.

It was planned, and comprehensive. Executive bodies were set up to manage and operate the different sections of the industry: the Railway Executive, the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive, the Road Transport Executive and the London Transport Executive.

Transforming Britain

These changes took effect from January 1948 as part of the nationalisation agenda of Attlee's Labour Government. They were very much in tune with a widespread post-war desire to transform British society from the 1930s private enterprise slump.

The British Transport Commission was an ambitious scheme to create a publicly owned, centrally planned, integrated transport system. Different modes of transport were to be coordinated to cooperate and supplement each other instead of competing. This was to be achieved by means of fare and rate adjustments.

That was the theory. Yet in practice, very little integration ever materialised.

There was a Road Haulage Executive, which operated under the trading name of British Road Services (BRS). It took over the road distribution assets of the railway com-

'In practice, very little integration ever materialised.'



An iconic legacy of nationalised road haulage: a BRS Bristol.

panies and began the process of nationalising road transport firms. Haulage firms working in a local radius of up to 25 miles and certain specialised firms were excluded.

From 1948 to 1952, RHE acquired 3,766 undertakings with 80,212 staff, 41,265 vehicles and 1,000 depots. These developments built on wartime experience: in 1939 all road vehicles had come under the control of the Emergency Road Transport Organisation and were directed to the needs of the war effort.

BRS instituted many working improvements, including better pay and working hours closely regulated by management and unions. The Transport and General Workers Union was strongly organised in the firm. Drivers were allowed enough time to do the job working in well maintained vehicles, and every kind of support was readily available.

Better vehicles were introduced, such as the Bristol eight-wheeler. Its 32-gallon fuel tank allowed it to travel between any two depots in the land. BRS vehicles were also the first to have cab heaters, proper radiator blinds and a decent working environment for the driver. The big square cab of the last model Bristol was state of the art.

BRS went on to work with Scammell to produce the Crusader. For many years its trucks had an iconic red livery.

The road haulage industry bitterly opposed nationalisation and found allies in the Conservative Party. The Road Haulage Association had set up a Fighting Fund in 1945 to keep road haulage in private hands. Haulier company owners knew they would lose their "freedom" to squeeze every penny out of poorly maintained, worn-out vehicles and hard-pressed drivers.

Hauliers relied on keeping wages down, so drivers worked long hours to make up their wages. In 1948 there was a huge anti-nationalisation campaign run largely by haulage owner Henry Duffield, who despatched van-loads of petitions to Downing Street. It turned out that at the same time he was organising the takeover of his firm on favourable terms – he finished up on the Road Haulage Executive.

Consensus broken

Up to 1951 all the political parties largely accepted major state intervention. The election of the Conservatives in 1951 broke the postwar consensus. The new government accepted the continuation of most of the state-controlled sectors, but made dena-

tion. Capitalism's
s early as 1953...

ds

'Denationalisation was the new government's first objective.'

tionalisation of the road haulage industry its
first objective.

Large pro-nationalisation rallies in 1952
opposed the proposed return of road
haulage to the private sector. But privatisa-
tion and deregulation followed with the
1953 Transport Act, although a slimmed-
down BRS continued to operate as a state-
owned company.

The still heavily regulated railways and
buses were left under the control of the
British Transport Commission. Private road
haulage companies were then freed to pur-
sue carriage of the most profitable traffic.

Rail kept its "common carrier" burden,
meaning it had to provide a public service
without discrimination and could not refuse
unprofitable business. And they were
specifically prevented from operating road
haulage services to railway depots.

BRS remained larger than any private
firm even after the culling of denationalisa-
tion. With 8,000 vehicles, it continued to
make profits up to the early 1970s.

The incoming 1979 Tory government
wanted to get back to the pre-1948
exploitative laissez-faire attitude. BRS,
renamed National Freight Corporation, was
one of Thatcher's first sell-offs in 1982. The
company is still in business. But decades
later we still have no integrated transport
service. Movement of people and goods
remains at the mercy of private profit.

Transport is of pivotal importance to
society. In the wrong hands it can be used
against workers, as in Chile in 1972. And
private haulage firms were used to ferry
scab coal during the 1984-5 Miners' Strike.
Yet in the right hands road haulage is a
force for economic good, a vital distributive
link within an integrated transport network.

For more historical details on road and
rail in the postwar decades, see *Workers*
May 2011 at www.cpbml.org.uk. ■

6 SIX CALLS TO ACTION

Worried about the future of
Britain? Join the CPBML.

Our country is under attack. Every single institution is in decline. The only growth is in unemployment, poverty and war. There is a crisis – of thought, and of deed. The Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist has recently held its 16th Congress, a coming together of the Party to consider the state of Britain and what needs to happen in the future. Here we set out briefly six Calls to Action for the British working class – for a deeper explanation, see www.workers.org.uk.

1: Out of the European Union, enemy to our survival

The European Union represents the dictatorship of finance capital, foreign domination. The British working class must declare our intention to leave the EU.

2: No to the breakup of Britain, defend our national sovereignty

Devolution, and now the threat of separation, are both products of only one thing: de-industrialisation. Any referendum on the break-up of Britain must be held through-out Britain.

3: Rebuild workplace trade union organisation

Unions exist as working members in real workplaces or they become something else entirely – something wholly negative. Take responsibility for your own unions.

4: Fight for pay, vital class battleground

The fight for pay is central to our survival as a class, and must be central to the agenda of our trade unions.

5: Regenerate industry, key to an independent future

The regeneration of industry in Britain is essential to the future of our nation. Our grand-parents, and theirs, knew this. We must now reassert it at the centre of class thinking.

6: Build the Party

The task of the Party is singular: to change the ideology of the British working class in order that they make revolution here.

Interested in these ideas?

- Go along to meetings in your part of the country, or join in study to help push forward the thinking of our class. Get in touch to find out how to take part.
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Ebola: capitalist health exposed

'All capitalism is worried about is whether restrictions on international travel might dent profits.'

JUST ABOUT every aspect of the insanity of capitalism is exposed by the current outbreak of Ebola virus centred on west Africa.

In principle, it should not be too difficult to control Ebola. But that's not what has happened. The outbreak is now the worst on record – by some distance – and cases have also cropped up in the US.

It's nearly 6,000 miles from Liberia to Dallas, Texas, the route travelled by Thomas Eric Duncan when he brought Ebola infection to the US. And it should be a world away in terms of healthcare. After all, the US spends about \$8,900 per capita on health each year; Liberia around \$65.

And it's not as if Ebola is a particularly difficult disease to contain. Yes, it is highly contagious, but it does not transmit well through the air, and it degrades so rapidly under heat that washing your hands with soap and hot water is sufficient to kill it.

Yet the two American nurses who treated Duncan at the Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital have both contracted Ebola. It seems as if some elementary disease control precautions were not implemented.

That's par for the course for a country that devotes high sums to healthcare, but where so little of it goes towards treating people and ensuring proper prevention. And let's face it, there's no money for capitalism in Ebola management. All capitalism is worried about is whether restrictions on international travel might dent profits.

Despite spending 17.9 per cent of its GDP on healthcare (against 9.4 per cent by Britain), the US – according to the World Bank – ranks lower than Britain on almost every major health indicator, including life expectancy.

The NHS is generally acknowledged (except by politicians here) to be incredibly efficient and effective. Unlike the US, we don't divert 30 per cent of healthcare funding to administration – amazingly, up from less than 25 per cent 20 years ago – primarily feeding the hungry mouths of insurance companies.

But like the US we rely on overseas labour

to staff our health services, rather than training sufficient numbers of our own staff.

That's not to denigrate the skill or bravery of health professionals from Britain who have gone to West Africa. But once there, they are finding such dire shortages of staff that teaching prevention has been a hard task.

One infection control expert from Camden, recently returned from a month-long stint in Sierra Leone, reported just four clinicians at the hospital in Kenema. Said Rebecca Stretch, "Staff were in short supply which made things difficult. For example, you couldn't 'buddy up' as there was too much to do. 'Buddying up' is one of the best ways to help prevent the spread of infection as you have somebody to spot the risks whilst you work."

King's College London, which has a health partnership with Sierra Leone, says there are fewer than a hundred doctors practising in the public sector, and reports vacancy rates there of over 60 per cent for nurses. In 2010, the World Health Organization reported that there were only 51 doctors in the whole of Liberia.

Against that background, the continuing employment of African doctors in the British and US health systems is a scandal, and one that few people want to talk about. There has been some progress since the middle of the last decade, when just over half of all new applications to go on the nursing register were from abroad. And many people from abroad are using jobs in nursing homes as a back door into the British nursing market.

To see what can really be achieved by a country that treats the health of all as a priority, look at Cuba. Not only is its infant mortality rate lower than that of the US, its solidarity with developing countries means that in September there were more than 4,000 Cuban health workers serving in Africa, 2,269 of them doctors.

While Cubans are supporting the workforce in Africa, too many recruiting agencies are still depleting the African health workforce to staff hospitals in Britain, Europe and the US. ■

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