

WORKERS

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THE NHS: OURS TO DEFEND!



Breaking the myth of the 'pensions crisis'

03



Don't trust those children's trusts

09



Forget the Labour Party – join the future!

16

WORKERS

You only live once

DIGNITY AT birth. Dignity in infancy, childhood, youth. Dignity at work. Dignity if needing support or in trouble. Dignity in retirement. You only live once. Might as well live a dignified existence on earth and earn good wages and pensions. And spare a thought for each other to be really dignified.

Think what we could do if our dignity were not so often under attack. Think how relieved we would be if there were no estate agents, landowners, or employers screwing us down. Think how much better it would be if politicians disappeared. We could run things in a dignified manner.

How can we be dignified in Britain when our elected spokesman Blair kills, maims and mistreats workers at home and abroad? He is but a cipher of our weakness, which allows him to act like a president. Rather than telling foreigners like Bush what to do, he – like them – is entirely dominated by the lust for profit.

A lot of people would like to replace Tony and Gordon with their own undignified leaders who want to change Parliament in their favour. The indignity of social democracy returns. We have resurrection and repeat of past mistakes. Biggest mistake workers have made? Creating a Labour Party to play with parliament.

Ego of course is very undignified. Individual ambitions mean nothing. Dignity and self esteem only really come about because of the

collective. I help you, you help me. Now we are talking about real dignity.

To have a leader of Britain so opposed to workers at home and throughout the world is an embarrassment. Blair plays the “sheriff of Nottingham” to eastern European entrants to the EU, seeking to get those stifled by EU trade rules into even more debt. He seeks to squash British unions, break the country up into competing tribal factions, and undo the dignity of industry, agriculture, state education, free health services, and jobs in public service. He is neither worse nor better than the Tories. They all represent something else, a foreign body in our midst.

He seeks to destroy Britain as a nation and take us into decadence with 24-hour drinking and American casinos. He has become a flag of convenience for the rest of world capitalism, as Thatcher did in her time – only with more success. The pathetic thing is he cannot outdo China and the US. He cannot outdo British workers either. That is his Achilles heel and ours.

We don’t need a new Labour character, parliamentary party or representation committee to repeat the near fatal mistakes of 100 years ago. That we are beginning to act undignified is a matter only we can address. Do the business where you work and in your union.

We need to establish class power.



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Contents – January 2006

News

Seafarers fight for jobs as employer brings in migrant scabs, p3; Iraq – US makes its grab for the oil, p4; Teachers strike against pay cuts in new structure, p5; News Analysis: The imposition of religion, p6

03

Features

Breaking through the myth of the ‘pensions crisis’, p6; Brown’s pre-budget speech: war and crumbs, p7; Just say no to attacks on the NHS, p9; Reform of children’s services: the thin end of a rather nasty wedge, p12

06

Historic Notes

In praise of the Reformation, p14

14



FERRIES	Seafarers fight for jobs
TORTURE	Government overruled
ID CARDS	Hidden hand of the EU
IRAQ	US tightens grip on oil
FOOD	Weetabix cuts
EDUCATION	Teachers fight pay cuts
HEALTH	Punished for being poor
EUROTRASH	The latest from Brussels
WHAT'S ON	Coming soon
NEWS ANALYSIS	The imposition of religion

Seafarers fight for their jobs

TORTURE Law lords rule against govt

AROUND 80,000 workers marched through the Dublin on Friday 9 December in a day of protest organised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in solidarity with Irish Ferries workers, who are threatened with losing their jobs. Protests were held in towns across Ireland. Welsh trade unionists have demonstrated at Pembroke Dock and Holyhead. The TUC sent representatives to the docksides and the Dublin protest.

The dispute began on Friday 25 November, when management attempted to smuggle workers from eastern Europe on board the 34,000-tonne Isle of Inishmore at Pembroke docks in Wales. The military-style operation used security guards disguised as civilians, but they had not reckoned on the quick thinking of the crew on board. When the guards announced over the Tannoy that they were taking over the ship, officers ran to the engine control room and barricaded themselves in. They are still there, with plenty of provisions.

A sister ship, the Ulysses, promptly announced it was also under the control of its Irish crew, and would be staying put until management withdrew the threat to replace 543 workers with migrants from Latvia and other eastern European countries.

Irish Ferries management has declared that Irish workers, many of them on the Irish minimum hourly wage of 7.65 euros (about £5.20), are just too expensive. Obviously so, when the eastern European workers were prepared to work for 3.60 euros! Management were planning to make this change by reflagging the fleet as Cypriot.

Occupying workers were offered a redundancy package, a 50% pay cut, or dismissal. When management's declared deadline passed on 8 December with no response from unions, the threat was withdrawn. As WORKERS went to press, the ships remain in the hands of the crew and are going nowhere.

Strangely, although there has been widespread denunciation of "a greedy and grubby company intent on maximising profits", there has been no mention of the EU by national trade union bodies, in spite of the fact that this kind of employer action is precisely what the EU is designed to make possible. Now that employers can import the cheapest migrant labour from anywhere within the EU, many industries – for instance, building, decorating and catering – have already seen a similar "race to the bottom" in terms of wages and conditions. This is the "free movement of labour" in action. The difference in the Irish Ferries dispute is that the indigenous workers are organised, and prepared to take action.

Irish and British trade union leaders appear embarrassed by this dispute – falling over themselves to say that the dispute is not against migrant labour. Why not? The migrant workers being used in this dispute must have known they were being used to sack Irish workers. Is a scab any better for being a migrant?

SEVEN JUDGES in Britain's highest court ruled on 8 December that intelligence extracted by torture is not admissible in any British court. The Law Lords unanimously overturned an appeal court judgment of August 2004 that such evidence could be used if it was obtained abroad from third parties and if the British government had not condoned or connived in the torture. The appeal court had ruled that the government need not inquire into whether evidence supplied by foreign countries had been obtained by torture.

The judgement ensures that the fruits of the US policy of 'extraordinary rendition' - flying suspects to foreign countries for interrogation - would never be admissible in British courts.

IDENTITY CARDS Hidden hand of the EU

THE GOVERNMENT is desperate to play down the EU's drive to introduce ID cards. Britain's minister for e-government, Jim Murphy, repeatedly denies that the EU intends to introduce EU ID cards.

But a ministerial declaration, approved unanimously at an EU conference in Manchester in November, set out four targets for European e-government by 2010. Target Number Four is "mutually recognised electronic identifications". It calls on all EU member states to work towards "the mutual recognition of national electronic identities by testing, piloting and implementing suitable technologies and methods". That is, EU ID cards.

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

EUOTRASH

The latest from Brussels

Gather round, children

THE EUROPEAN Commission has published a book to explain the EU, which is being distributed to primary school children across Europe. It tells them that the EU Constitution is simply "on hold". It compares the Constitution to a sports club's rules and claims, "With this new constitution everything will go like clockwork, just like in your club." A Commission official said, "Some people might argue that the Constitution is dead. But it is still on the table. The only thing that has been decided is that there will be a period of reflection."

German lecture

THE NEW German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has reaffirmed her government's wish to revive the EU Constitution. Addressing the European Parliament on 23 November she said, "Europe needs the Constitution ... we are willing to make our contribution to whatever is necessary to see the Constitution come into force."

Such understanding

On 1 December, the European Central Bank raised the Eurozone interest rate to 2.25%. John Monks, leader of the European TUC, crawlingly said, "If the ECB wanted to give a warning signal to trade unions on upcoming wage negotiations by increasing its interest rate, this was totally unnecessary. Trade unions in Europe already understand the need to have wage increases compatible with the objective of price stability."

Poles sorry now

POLISH FARMERS now admit that many were better off before the capitalist counter-revolution, when they were free to sell all their produce without outside competition. They also want the Common Agricultural Policy abolished.

Rebate? What rebate?

BLAIR HAS said that he is prepared to give up parts of the £3 billion a year British rebate. Confused Whitehall sources described this cut both as "symbolic" and as a "contribution to the cost of EU enlargement". Earlier this year Blair promised, "The UK rebate will remain and we will not negotiate it away, period."



Postal workers fight privatisation threats: this card with its signatures was put on display at a Communication Workers Union rally in Northampton on Saturday 8 December.

US tightens grip on Iraq oil

OVER A HUNDRED thousand dead, mostly women and children and for what? So that UK and US oil companies can plunder the once nationalised oil reserves of Iraq, the sixth largest in the world. Multinational companies, often directly linked to the Republican Party, profited from the military expenditure against Iraq, then profited from the contracts to rebuild the infrastructure. Now their real prize is in sight: the oil they have coveted since the turn of the last century. As Sir Maurice Hankey, Britain's First Secretary of the War Cabinet in 1918, said: "Control over these oil supplies becomes a first class British war aim."

The US and UK occupiers are now negotiating long term, largely secret, Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs) with the Iraqi puppet government. These tie Iraq to between 25 and 40 year deals whereby at least 64% of Iraq's oil reserves will be developed by private multinational oil companies (mostly British and American).

At an oil price of \$40 per barrel, Iraq stands to lose between \$74 billion and \$194 billion over the lifetime of the proposed contracts from only the first 12 of more than 60 to be developed. Under the likely terms of the contracts, oil company rates of return from investing in Iraq would range from 42% to 162%, which is far in excess of the usual industry minimum target of around 12% return on investment. While technically the legal ownership of the oil reserves is retained in Iraqi state hands, in reality the Iraqi oil will profit American and British capitalists. The PSAs will be immune from any public scrutiny and would lock any new Iraqi government into economic terms that cannot be altered for decades. None of the top oil producers in the Middle East use PSAs.

The General Union of Oil Employees in Basrah is opposing the PSAs and requires messages of solidarity on naftana@riseup.net. Further details of what is happening to Iraq's oil can be found in "Crude Designs, the Rip Off of Iraq's Oil Wealth", published by War on Want and others on mailroom@waronwant.org.

FOOD MANUFACTURE

'What are you made of'

WEETABIX, which employs 1,700 people in Northamptonshire in Burton Latimer near Kettering, and at Corby, has declared that 112 jobs will go. In November 2003 the company was taken over by the US firm Hicks, Muse, Tate and Furst, for £642 million. At the time Sir Richard George, the previous owner and chairman, said there would be no job losses, declaring, "in fact quite the opposite".

The news came as a shock to Kettering and Corby workers, who have described the

cuts as a kick in the teeth, and who fear that more cuts are in the pipeline. Dave Thom, the Area Organiser for Usdaw, the shopworkers' union, has said the union will be campaigning against the cuts.

Weetabix, which started up in 1932, is one of Britain's biggest cereals manufacturers. They make breakfast standbys such as Ready Brek and Alpen and their new marketing campaign asks "What Are You Made Of?"

The American venture capital company Hicks, Muse, Tate and Furst owns Premier Foods UK, which in turn owns the manufacturers of a wide product range, including Branston and Ambrosia.

HEALTH**Professions fight govt grab**

THE NURSING and Midwifery Council (NMC) has unanimously agreed to oppose the government proposal to take away their right to self-regulation. Currently nurses and midwives accused of misconduct are tried by their peers. A government review of non-medical regulation has recommended the creation of an "independent, unified adjudicatory body" for all health professionals other than doctors. The proposed membership of

what would be effectively a private agency is unclear.

Members of the NMC and the health unions point out that the recommendation is not based on any critique of current practice. The current system of self-regulation already has a built-in safeguard which allows for judicial review of any NMC decision that is deemed to be too lenient or too harsh. Since 2003 only two out of 2,849 cases have had to be referred for review. NMC member Marianne Cowpe said: "It is ludicrous to say that our system is not working when there is no evidence to support that conclusion."

Teachers fight pay cuts

TEACHERS IN AROUND 150 schools are threatening industrial action over the introduction of new payments for management allowances (TLRs). Most of the teaching unions agreed the new system with the government, but many teachers have only just woken up to the reality of what their unions have signed up to on their behalf. Many will face significant pay cuts (of up to £10,000) in three years' time and reduced pensions in the longer term.

The NUT, the only union not to sign up to the agreement, has run a number of informal ballots in schools where teachers are losing out and so far they have all come out in favour of taking action. A number of disputes have already been settled as a result. Even the NAS/UWT, which signed the agreement, is threatening action in Derbyshire, Southampton, Stoke and Worcestershire, although it has been forced to blame head teachers for applying the new rules wrongly!

So far, formal ballots have been held in 10 schools among NUT members, and all have come out in favour of action. One school, Hipperholme and Lightcliffe High School in Halifax, West Yorkshire, could see teachers walking out before Christmas.

HEALTH**Punished for being poor**

IN NOVEMBER, Primary Care Trusts in Suffolk ruled that obese people would not get operations like hip and knee replacements.

Dr Brian Keeble, from Ipswich PCT, said, "Patients who are overweight and obese do worse after operations. Lighter people tend to do better in terms of hip replacements not working. But we cannot pretend this work wasn't stimulated by the pressing financial problems of the NHS in East Suffolk."

"Doing worse after operations" could be used to deny operations to all but the very slimmest and fittest of patients, and signals a move to an NHS geared to treating only the least poorly. Lack of mobility will further exacerbate the health problems of the obese, who will be unable to exercise to lose weight.

The government's treatment watchdog, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), has now recommended that the NHS refuse treatment to certain patients, particularly

those who smoke or drink or are overweight. NICE says that the NHS should avoid denying care to patients with conditions that are, or may be, "self-inflicted". But then it says that if such causes influence the clinical or cost effectiveness of the use of an intervention, it may be appropriate to take this into account.

Fat people, think people, tall and short are entitled to the same level of health care from the NHS. To rule otherwise would be a slippery slope towards selective rather than universal health care.

FIREFIGHTERS**Strikes in West Midlands**

FIREFIGHTERS across the West Midlands held a series of strikes over a period of two weeks in November. The strikes, lasting one shift period on three different days, were taken in defence of conditions affecting shift cover and payments.

The employers backed down, putting amended proposals, which are being voted on by FBU members in the region.

WHAT'S ON**Coming soon****FEBRUARY**

Wednesday 8 February

Defend Council Housing lobby of parliament

Defend Council Housing is organising a lobby of parliament to call for direct investment in council housing. Followed by a rally in Central Hall, Westminster. For more details, see www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk.

MARCH

Saturday 18 March

Keep Broadcasting Public, 10am-4pm

Conference at Congress House, London, organised by the TUC, the Federation of Entertainment Unions and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom to discuss the forthcoming White Paper on BBC Charter Renewal. For details, email freepress@cpcb.org.uk.

HIGHER EDUCATION**Tribunal backs lecturers**

ON 7 DECEMBER an employment tribunal ruled in favour of members of Natfhe, the university and college lecturers' union, who claimed unfair dismissal from London Metropolitan University (LMU). The claim, brought by 23 lecturers, was that they were unfairly dismissed after LMU imposed a new contract on 387 academic staff in order to "harmonise" terms and conditions after the institution was created via a merger of London Guildhall University and the University of North London.

On 2 April 2004 LMU issued dismissal notices to 387 members of academic staff who were previously employed by London Guildhall. The lecturers were told that their silence would be treated as acceptance of the ex-North London contract. Of those 387, 23 pursued a claim for unfair dismissal. The contracts row sparked a 16-month dispute between Natfhe and the university, which was concluded in the union's favour in Summer 2005.

Roger Kline, Natfhe's head of universities said; "We welcome the tribunal's decision that our members were unfairly dismissed following the merger of the two universities. Natfhe has always argued this was the case and if only the university had agreed to sit down and talk with us on how this process should have been handled, a damaging 16-month dispute could have been avoided."

The imposition of religion

THE INCREDIBLY named Equality Challenge Unit has published its guidance for "Employing People in Higher Education: Religion and Belief". The ECU has consulted every religious body in the UK, be they single cults, multi-faith organisations, religions with single campaign obsessions, flat-earthists or good old-fashioned pagans. The purpose of the ECU document is to continue the elevation of religion in Britain and permit tiny and dwindling religious organisations to foist their cult ideas on youth, via schools, colleges and higher education institutions. Religion is smuggled into the workplace by abuse of the legislative process.

Reactionary legislation, mostly emanating from the European Union, is being foisted on Britain: the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulation 2003 which follows from the EU Framework Directive of 2000 and the draft Racial and Religious Hatred Bill, which has yet to face Parliamentary opposition. Much is made of protecting minority religious opinions.

The government's own figures indicate that self-defining religious labelling equates to 72% Christian, 6% other religions combined (Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Other (including Star Wars characters) and 22% non-religious or atheist. What the government does not highlight is that of the 78% who claim some sort of religious leaning, 50% admit to never having attended any religious ceremony. It is estimated that only 7% of those who claim any religious belief attend a religious ceremony or place of worship on a regular basis. "Regular" is not defined – it could be eating turkey once a year!

Redundant churches

The first Redundant Churches Act was passed in Britain in 1874. This legislation provided for state funding to prevent the physical collapse of Church of England buildings which had neither a congregation nor clergyman. That legislation is updated annually as religious buildings of all denominations dwindle and fold.

Every religious strand of thought has developed in conjunction with the economic class forces of the day. Hence Catholicism replaced paganism and early religious views and Protestantism replaced Catholicism as the capitalists overthrew feudalism. Religions rooted in other feudal or pre-feudal societies, such as Judaism, Sikhism, Islam and Buddhism, survive, reflecting uneven development across the world. The resurrection of fundamentalism, from whatever source, whether it be Christian, Creationist, Islamist or Zionist, reflects more the use of religion by economic interests, such as imperialism, to dominate and retain power.

Religion must be unplugged from its parasitical life support systems. No more state money for redundant religious buildings – they should be found a proper secular use (such as housing). No funding of creationist City Academies or religious schools. Reason and science must expunge superstition and backwardness.

After the climbdown over public sector putting up stiffer resistance...

Breaking through the my

PENSIONS HAVE now become firmly placed at the top of the trade union agenda, but not in the usual way of seeking improvements. This time it is to defend them from attacks by both employers and the government. Many, including some trade unionists, have been willing to accept the myth of a "pensions crisis" caused by people living longer and the lowering of the birth rate. Surely in a modern society we should be welcoming the fact that people are living longer, and population projections taking this into account have always been used to calculate the basis for our pension schemes.

The class should not be taken in by spurious population arguments – it is really an issue of what we want our taxes to be spent on. The EU wants more money and the government is using an EU directive to try and get it by robbing public service workers of their pensions. The specific issue affecting the Local Government Pension Scheme is the government proposal to remove the benefit of the "rule of 85", which allows employees who are 60 or over to retire if their age and years of service added together amount to 85 or more.

The directive in question is 2000/78/EC, which requires Britain to remove any practices which can be considered age discriminatory. It gives the government the justification it needs to attack the rule of 85. This was also confirmed by an official from the office of the Deputy Prime Minister who said – addressing a conference organised by the TGWU and GMB in Eastbourne in December – that it was not the regulations being brought in by government that meant the rule of 85 had to be removed, but the European Directive.

It's official – the EU's behind it

So there we have it from the horse's mouth: if Britain were not in the European Union there would be no need to remove the rule of 85. The proclaimed reason for this directive was to prevent discrimination against older workers; its effect, of course, is the opposite.

One delegate in Eastbourne, when questioning Prescott's official, asked why the same principle against supposed age discrimination was not being applied to the lower minimum wages for those between 16 and 21 years of age, the voting age, and for that matter the pensions of MPs. The reply was that it was out of his remit!

This is not the only European directive that has resulted in a lowering of terms and conditions. Recently an attempt was made to replace an Irish ferry crew with a crew from Eastern Europe on far worse terms and conditions, and workers in the food industry face the same (see News, page 3). Instead of offering to return part of Britain's rebate, Blair should be returning the blue flag with stars on it and withdrawing Britain from the EU.

The trade unions have reacted angrily to the announcement to parliament by Phil Woolas, a minister in Prescott's department, that the government would move to scrap the rule of 85 while staying silent on replacing it with a benefit for all. The Community and Youth Workers Union and Unison have already sanctioned a ballot for industrial action if needed, and the other unions involved are expected to follow suit. Trade union members must make sure that the negotiators in local government do not fall for the same trick that the Public Services Forum did, namely just protecting current members. They must campaign for a replacement that will apply to all.

The Public Services Forum agreement with the government is now coming under attack and rightly so. While some trade unions and their negotiators can hold their heads high for opposing the deal, the same cannot be said of the majority. Where would our class be today if our

or pensions, unions in local government – and elsewhere – are

Birth of the ‘pensions crisis’

‘It really does take some believing that the TUC and some trade union general secretaries can hail the agreement as the greatest victory for trade unions since the war...’

predecessors had had the same attitude to negotiations as these did? It is the responsibility of all who take up positions to represent our class that they take a class perspective with them and don't just look at the present members, but also to the future generations, and ensuring that they have decent terms and conditions including pensions.

The Natfhe national executive has recently condemned the deal and made a stinging attack on those who approved it by passing two motions, the first one condemning the deal and the weakness of the unions' response. The second goes on to say, among other things, that the current proposals are divisive and will

create a two-tier workforce, that had our predecessors not fought for our pension rights we would now have nothing to defend, and that the union should continue to campaign and fight for the right for all members to retire at 60 on full pension.

Natfhe went on to urge the executives of PCS and NUT to reconsider their decisions. Natfhe's NEC has got it right in arguing a clear class line – what a pity that this may be too late to overturn the ratification of the agreement. But if Labour tries to unpick it to make it worse, we might well consider unpicking it to make it better.

Gas workers fight

It is not just in local government that attacks on occupational pensions are being fought. Gas engineers who are members of the GMB have returned an 80% vote in favour of strike action over the decision to close the scheme to new starters. Four days of strike action in December and two in January are to be backed up by a ban on out-of-hours cover between 12 and 23 December and 4 and 10 January.

The GMB members and officers involved should be congratulated on the stance they are taking. Their action shows

that those who have been arguing that members would not vote for action over future employees' rights are far removed from their members and therefore the class.

This dispute shows that workers are not so lacking in consciousness as low as some think. It also shows that if all the unions had continued to support the retirement age of 60, opposed the two-tier system, and then given the leadership, information and trust, the whole of the trade union movement could have been mobilised to defend the schemes not just for current members but also future ones.

Anyway, better no agreement than the shameful one negotiated for the public services. It really does take some believing that the TUC and some trade union general secretaries can hail that agreement as the greatest victory for trade unions since the war.

Another union whose members have voted by over 90% to take industrial action over plans to close a pension scheme is Amicus. Members based on the Wirral are taking action after a take-over of Typhoo by Apeejay Surrendra (an Indian company) in October. The take-over resulted in proposals to close the scheme and replace it with a money-purchase scheme without consultation, according to the union.

If anyone thinks that this round of talks over occupational pensions will mark the end of the government's intent then they must think again. If the pension age is increased to 67 or 69 then it will not be too long before they come back again to raise the age for retirement. That is why the Local Government Pension Scheme negotiators have a responsibility to the class to fight against a two-tier system and to retain the ability to retire at 60 with no reduction and no extra cost.

How can unions recruit new members in local government, having just agreed they will have second-class pension rights? Unions are about nothing if not unity of workers. If this battle can be won then that would be a victory for the class worthy of praise instead of the condemnation that rightly has been delivered to the Public Services Forum by Natfhe's national executive.



TUC fight for pensions? Pigs might fly. But gas workers and others are showing the way.

The government is plundering money from workers in taxes and unpaid labour, and spending it on reaction...

War and crumbs – Brown's statement

YOU CAN'T PREDICT how dice will fall. The Chancellor gets berated for getting his forecasts wrong in an anarchic and unpredictable capitalist casino economy, but gets away with funding war and EU waste while throwing a few meagre crumbs to the deserving poor.

It used to be said that British workers consciously colluded with imperialism by accepting the crumbs it threw from the table. There was never any truth in this, as in reality everything had to be fought for. But there is a real danger now that we are becoming too grateful for the little that we are thrown without a fight and too uncritical of the way in which billions are spent on waste and destruction.

Waste

The wasted expenditure in the EU was not mentioned in the Budget, nor was the effect of any rebate which Blair appears willing to surrender. But £580 million more was allocated to cause further mayhem and death in Iraq, on top of the £5 billion already spent.

The Chancellor plugs his gaps by taxing oil companies in the North Sea oil fields by about £5 billion more, but they are secretly happy because those with an interest in Iraq know that they stand to gain many times more than this under the new Production Sharing Agreements (see News, page 3) being arranged there. Arms producers too are laughing all the way to the bank; no need to tighten their belts.

The Chancellor juggles with tax revenues, which are a relatively small part of the wealth of the nation. Capitalist companies have more liquid assets at their disposal each year than a government. Much more. The government's total direct income of £483 billion is less than the combined wealth of the 300 richest people in Britain. The top 25 richest individuals in Britain could pay ten times over from their increased profits last year for all of the good causes like pensioners' home heating and the youth and community projects which the Chancellor announced. The surplus value that becomes profit in private company bank accounts makes the government's coffers look like a piggy bank of old

'The wasted expenditure in the EU was not mentioned in the Budget. But £580 million more was allocated to cause further mayhem and death in Iraq...'

pennies. Imagine what could be done if all the wealth of Britain were at our disposal.

Of course since Labour came to power in 1997 they have reduced the tax burden on the very richest by 3.8%, while for the lowest income households it has risen by 11.4%. This in small part explains the rapid rise of the millionaires and billionaires who dance at Downing Street's court. One good friend of the government, Philip Green, made £1.2 billion in bonus this year alone, which he gave to his wife's off shore account to avoid taxes and paid £2 million back as conscience money to buy a college. MPs and company bosses, anxious to make everyone else think there is a 'pensions crisis', are demanding more to be put into their own pension schemes.

Meanwhile the Commons Public Accounts Committee estimates conservatively that the Chancellor would have had £8 billion more to spend on public services if so much had not been wasted on failed projects and fraud. Imagine that: 15 large hospitals more, if money had not been wasted on

harebrained schemes and corruption. Add to that alone our huge net payments into the EU, some £3 billion a year, and at a stroke you could start to talk about real investment in science and technology, industry and public services. But then add the £850 billion in pension funds – earmarked for plundering to fund the EU, hence the so-called 'crisis' - and you could double total government spending on good causes with no problem at all.

Governments can fall

A previous Labour government fell on the issue of pay restraint. Yet Brown has succeeded in imposing pay restraint for eight years. This year's has a new twist: inflation at 2.3% while Brown is looking for no more than 2% pay rises in the health service for example. It is going to be the struggle for wages that could again undo the whole hypocrisy and waste of the capitalist government's income and expenditure account. While workers are modest, the employers flagrantly line their pockets and pensions, and celebrities flaunt the unearned wealth of a decadent system.

Government borrowing, a projected £37 billion, is of course good news for the usurers who will lend it. The sale of more public assets, this year £5.7 billion worth, is also good news for those who snaffle public assets up at bargain basement prices. So too is massive public investment linked to public private initiatives. And the education market soon to be opened up by the White Paper on schools is expected by some sharks to deliver 11.7 million students paying between £5,000 and £15,000 a year for the privilege of private education.

Bring out your badges

Do you have any old labour movement and political badges in odd containers and drawers? Put them to good use and send them to the CPBML – we'll sell them at labour movement events during the year to raise money for the Party. Please send them to:

Badges
78 Seymour Avenue
London N17 9EB

The fight against the assault on the NHS must come from where the real power lies – from NHS staff themselves...

Just say No to the attack on the NHS



AS 2006 BEGINS many people inside and outside the NHS are asking three questions: What is the real state of the NHS, how did it get to be like this and what can we do about it?

If you work in the NHS you know that the answer to the first question is bad. All sorts of services are being reduced, hospital beds are closing and staff posts are being reduced. The famous Royal Free Hospital in London is a typical example of an NHS trust that has instituted a range of cost cutting measures since September to deal with its budget deficit. It calls these measures a new model of care but patients and staff know that nearly 100 beds have closed.

The King's Fund, an independent

organisation, which looks at the management of health and social care and largely supports government policy, has openly acknowledged that the end results of current reforms may be closures of major hospitals. It has just published a report called "How Should We Deal with Hospital Failure? Facing the challenges of the new NHS market".

Commenting on both this report and on the recently published annual report on NHS performance, Niall Dickinson, Chief Executive of the King's Fund, said on 7 December: "...the health service faces real financial problems and patient services will suffer unless the government deals with hospital failures better. The NHS is ill-placed to prevent hospital failure from happening and to deal with it when it does happen. ...We would like to see a more rigorous financial distress regime."

Hospital failure? Rigorous financial distress regime? The King's Fund has clearly lost the ability to speak English but we can all understand its code. A number of hospitals are likely to go bust as a consequence of government policy and there is no plan to bail them out. The King's Fund pretends that this is an unintended consequence of government policy but those who work in the NHS know that is the plan.

How did it get to be like this?

The situation is the result of a three pronged attack on the service. More visible since the general election, the origins of all three so-called initiatives pre-date the election.

They are:

- Expansion of the private sector
- Choice of provider
- Payment by results

Rather like a noxious pudding, it is a case of take the above three ingredients, stir well and add a good pinch of engineered conflict between GPs and the hospital sector and use any opportunity to sow division among NHS staff. A proper understanding of the three elements of the attack is the first step in repelling it. Crucially NHS staff still have significant control over all three elements and if they refuse to implement

'Crucially NHS staff still have control. If they refuse to implement government policy, then our offensive would begin....'

government policy, then our offensive would begin.

Expansion of the private sector

The particular form that private sector expansion currently takes in the NHS is the Independent Sector Treatment Centre (ISTC). These treatment centres mainly carry out routine surgical work and the Health Secretary claims that they are the key factor in reducing waiting times for surgery. The British Medical Association (BMA) last month gave detailed evidence to the Parliamentary Labour Party Health Committee outlining their impact on health care. Firstly it quoted the government's own data which show that in 2003-04 the procedures purchased under the ISTC programme cost on average 9% more than the NHS equivalent cost (HANSARD, Official Report, 16 March; Vol 432, c 273w).

The BMA pointed out there is no evidence to indicate that value for money is being achieved. There are instances of ISTC contracts being paid in full despite a failure to deliver the number of procedures set out in the contracts. In addition the whole business of administering a service from a clutch of small providers is expensive.

The BMA report also analyses how the ISTCs are fragmenting NHS services:

"We would wish to question the logic behind a scheme which sees patients having to travel from Durham to Middlesbrough for an MRI scan provided

Continued on page 10



Photo: Andrew Wiard/www.reportphotos.com

September 2001, and Unison general secretary Dave Prentis joins staff at Bart's Hospital, London, protesting against privatisation.

Continued from page 9

by the independent sector while an MRI scanner in Durham is idle. Similarly should it be the case that patients in Southampton are expected to travel to an orthopaedics ISTC provider in Salisbury while Southampton's own conventional orthopaedics centre has excess capacity and now in fact has to close capacity due to the loss of work to the independent sector?"

These specific and detailed examples provided by NHS workers expose privatisation for what it is: a device to fragment and close NHS capacity.

Another aspect of the ISTC is the EU inspired scheme which allows the ISTC to take over publicly financed building and equipment such as the state-of-the art

operating theatres at the new NHS treatment centre in Birmingham.

Crucially the BMA report dissects the government claim that the ISTCs are responsible for bringing down waiting lists. The ISTCs claim that they have reduced ophthalmic waiting times. However the report points out that the ophthalmic ISTC scheme is only responsible for 3% of the total cataract operations, for example. It is clear that it is traditional NHS hospitals working in new ways that have really made the impact on cataract waiting lists.

The impact of ISTCs on the education of doctors and other health care staff has already been highlighted in *WORKERS*. The BMA has now exposed how the government's contracts with ISTCs facilitate this destruction. They have

discovered that phase one of the ISTC programme specifically excludes these private providers completely from training responsibilities and there continues to be uncertainty regarding provision of training in phase two. The orthopaedic centre at Southampton mentioned above is now threatened with losing its training status due to transfer of work to the private sector. This example clearly illustrates that this is not a matter of transferring training from one sector to another; rather, the aim is to destroy existing facilities.

Choice of provider

1 January 2006 is day one of the government's choice agenda in the NHS, which means that if you need to be referred to hospital your GP must offer

you at least four options about where to go. If the GP is able to offer you 5 options, one must be in the private sector. This options process was meant to be accompanied by a £64 million computerised hospital appointments system called "Choose and Book", which was designed so that a fully trained doctor could sit with you in the surgery and click through the screens and book you in there and then. Needless to say in the pilot the system was found to be slow, unwieldy and the system crashed etc. while the patients in the waiting room piled up. Like many government purchases of US computer systems this one is now behind schedule and has been put back by one year but the choice agenda proceeds without computerisation.

Inaccessible

In many parts of Britain there is only one hospital that is easily accessible to a population. When the Consumers' Association conducted a survey on the government's plans, the public overwhelmingly responded that their preferred choice was for their local hospital to be of a good standard even in those areas where a number of hospitals were within reach. GPs have pointed out that most patients will not have the knowledge to choose, and as local GPs they cannot provide detailed information on all the options as they tend to make relationships with their local provider.

Inevitably discussing choices is going to eat into GP time, which could be spent dealing with clinical care. If patients choose the more expensive providers on the list of four, then GPs will find it

'Despite the scale of the attack, control still rests with working people so long as they wish to exercise it...'

increasingly difficult to manage budgets in any rational way. In turn all acute hospitals are developing marketing departments (!) to make themselves attractive to the patient. Presumably hospitals who are already struggling financially will have less funds to divert to marketing and hence may find themselves losing customers.

For this charade to work, GPs must willingly engage in the process. This particular absurdity could be rebuffed by GPs simply saying NO. As Dr Richard Varley of the BMA GP committee has pointed out, "GPs don't have a contractual obligation to engage in the choice agenda as defined by the Government."

Payment by results

This third prong of the government attack was first introduced in 2004 and means that hospitals are paid for the work they do at a nationally set price. It replaces the previous arrangement of locally agreed block contracts where providers were paid a set amount, regardless of the work they carried out. Currently the scheme

applies only to waiting list operations but there are plans to extend it to emergencies and outpatients from April 2006.

The problem with a nationally set price is that it ignores the different overheads of hospitals and different constraints upon them. For example overheads in teaching hospitals may be higher. Hospitals that are tied into Private Finance Initiatives may be obliged by the consortiums to have set contracts and may not have much freedom to change contracts for services. Crucially, hospitals that already have significant debt charges cannot negotiate a price, which at present helps them to manage that debt.

System suspended

On 6 December three strategic health authorities (SHAs) covering Hampshire, Surrey, Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire suspended the payment by results system saying they feared it would further destabilise hospitals that are already in financial trouble. Effectively three NHS regions and their senior NHS employees said NO to government policy. As WORKERS went to press no action had been taken against the SHAs.

So if GPs say NO and strategic health authorities say NO, at least two strands of the attack could be rebuffed. No one can force a GP to send a patient to an Independent Treatment Centre and patients could insist on NHS provision. Despite the scale of the attack, control still rests with working people so long as they wish to exercise it.

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As so often with this government, it all sounds good: bringing clarity for children that desperately need it. But look behind the rhetoric

Reform of children's services – the thin end



Photo: Workers

One of the new children's centres being planned by the government: amid the rhetoric, there are some worrying trends

IN JULY 2003 the government announced 35 pathfinder children's trusts supposedly to develop better integrated services for children and families in the light of the Victoria Climbié enquiry. However, amid the rhetoric of working together for children and young people the unions' experience to date with these pathfinders highlights some worrying trends for workers in local government, health and education.

The main thrust of the government's plans for the range of children's services provided by health, education and social services is contained in the White Paper Every Child Matters and the Children Act 2004 – insofar as any government that wants to sign up to the EU constitution and its monetarist economics can say it is planning long term for anything.

The new mechanisms claim to be designed to get public services working in a more integrated way so as to be able to

focus on outcomes for children.

In many ways the mechanisms are a rational response to such factors as repeated child death enquiries, highlighting the lack of communication and clarity of roles between different professions and their agencies as contributory factors in such tragedies.

But since 2003 the way that the 35 different local authorities and central government have gone about setting out the detail of their plans to develop the trusts raises concerns for workers: in particular, concerns centre on the retention of national pay bargaining, the terms and conditions of workers seconded to the trusts, the protection and promotion of workers' distinctive skills and knowledge, and the whole concept of quality public services.

These concerns go far beyond the initial statements of concern from Unison on the day that the pathfinder authorities

were announced in July 2003. Unison expressed a general concern that the trusts were announced at a time when the whole future of children's services is up in the air and states: "What is worse, our initial enquiries have revealed that very few of the pathfinder trusts seem to have bothered to talk to staff who are the people who will actually be delivering services."

Given that some of these pilot schemes, such as Brighton & Hove, plan to have the trusts operational by April next year, it is vital that workers and their unions keep up with these changes, in the same way unions responded to the Agenda for Change programme in health services. Indeed, it may now be the case that in some areas reactive campaigns will be necessary once the terms and conditions of workers are clearly under threat in each area, a situation workers could and should have avoided.

...ity, joined-up thinking and communication to a range of services
 ..., and you'll find another attack on workers and on skill...

...d of a rather nasty wedge

In the Brighton & Hove pathfinder the local authority is keen to stress that arrangements it is proposing will not mean a move to breaking down national pay and conditions agreements. Indeed, the consultation with unions has emphasised that staff transferred to the trust in April 2006 will retain the pay and conditions of either the children, families and schools department or the local NHS trusts.

However, central government sees this as an opportunity to introduce localised agreements over pay and conditions in the form of performance related pay. In a speech in 2002 Tony Blair called for flexibility from public service workers, and stated: "...those who strive for excellence know too that in many cases performance-related pay can be important".

Terms and conditions

There are worrying trends underneath the rhetoric around working together for the benefit of children and families. A national evaluation of the 35 pathfinders, conducted by East Anglia University, suggests a range of issues that still need to be addressed. One issue concerns finding suitable accommodation and resources to facilitate new ways of integrated working. This is alarming, given that it is being done within existing inadequate budgets, with no extra money.

Unison in Edinburgh has highlighted that run-down, poorly designed buildings were part of an overall lack of resources having a demonstrable effect on the ability of social workers to deliver safe child protection services. Despite planning for multidisciplinary teams of workers to be co-located by April 2006 Brighton & Hove council has still not identified adequate buildings for some of these teams!

Another issue identified in the review is that there is a need to ensure that there are sufficient staff to fill the posts left vacant when staff are recruited to multidisciplinary teams.

In Brighton & Hove this does not appear to have even been considered but the latest consultation with unions has mentioned potential redundancies as a

'The more skilled workers in a workplace can divide them and attack their pay and conditions...'

result of new posts being created in the multidisciplinary teams envisaged for the local trust. It looks as if workers left outside the trust will be expected to take on the work of those taken into it, and it will be bad luck if you happen to have a job which will now come under the trust but you are not successful in applying for that job!

The issue of skill and control over knowledge is crucial to workers generally. The more skilled workers in a workplace are, and the more control they have over who acquires skill in that workplace, the less employers can divide them and attack their pay and conditions.

However, in consultations with unions in Brighton & Hove, a worrying picture is emerging over plans to staff education facilities in Children's Centres (the proposed sites for multidisciplinary teams) with unqualified teaching staff. This is despite the council's own admission during consultation that research has shown that where there is qualified teacher input to nurseries young children learn much more.

The council is proposing that there will be qualified teacher input but that unqualified staff will cover for their professional development and leave requirements.

Education unions have pointed out that some aspects of this may in fact be illegal, and are becoming concerned at the proposal. However, the response of local Unison health and local government branches has been to request separate consultation so that meetings are not

dominated by the agenda of education. Slightly puzzling given that many of the unqualified education staff are likely to be members of Unison!

Local authorities which went for children's centres based around existing quality early years provision in schools are developing a service which will be of use to families.

Where they have gone down the route, encouraged of course by government, of complex Private Finance Initiative deals for rebuilding together with private day nurseries and voluntary playgroups to provide the day care and education, the children's centre programme is in chaos. In many authorities, the programme is mired in legal complexities, building problems, and management nightmares.

Finding professionals willing to be heads of the centres is — what a surprise — proving tricky at best. Now that the Sure Start local programmes are being brought back into local authority control in the guise of children's centres, professional workers will have the job of sorting out the mess.

Quality public services

In a speech in 2002 Alan Milburn stated that "...for those Children's Trusts that want to specialise in providing services we will want to explore a range of models in different parts of the country". These could potentially include local, not for profit public interest companies that could enlist the involvement of the community, voluntary and private sectors alongside the public sector.

Following this lead Brighton & Hove is reviewing a range of services to consider whether teams should be joined up and delivered by the trust or whether the most effective means of delivery is through the independent or voluntary sectors.

Again it is important for unions to keep up with this and to seek, firstly, to keep services within the public sector, and secondly, to maintain membership among any staff taken out to voluntary and private agencies, where their terms and conditions are likely to be worse and national agreements ignored at the whim of private and voluntary sector employers.

At a time when the government is trying to make religious bigotry remember how Britain dispensed 500 years ago with shrines, superstition and religious decrees – and with religious rule...

In praise of the Reformation



The sale of indulgences, from a print by Holbein.

THE REFORMATION in Britain was largely created by the ordinary people of Britain, those who had developed a strong dislike for the Church's pomp, ceremony, fasting and holy days, its cults of saints and veneration of images and relics, and its beliefs in ghosts, angels and demons. Having less emotional and financial investment in the old order than did the clergy and the landed class, they saw through the mysteries, signs and wonders of the Church, and its obsessions with Dooms and Last Days.

They opposed shrines and pilgrimages, indulgences (remissions of punishment for sins), pardons, the Latin Mass and the cult of intercession on behalf of the dead in Purgatory. They rejected the monastic ideal, which neglected the service of widows, children and the poor in the selfish quest of personal salvation.

They opposed the hierarchical, compulsorily celibate, mediating priesthood, and a church hierarchy that claimed proprietorial rights over what people should think and believe.

They opposed church decrees (canon law) and the power of the Pope. They forbade appeals to the Pope and payments

such as annates and Peter's pence. They opposed the claims of revealed religion and the all-embracing medieval Western church, which sought to override the sovereignty and independence of Britain.

They moved against the religious corporations, the Pope's fortresses, which ran vast estates and made huge profits. In 1535 the monasteries' total net income was £140,000, when the Crown's was £100,000.

The monasteries were rentiers for two-thirds of their income, from whole estates put out to farm, from rents taken from smallholders, from tenements and from woods. Even their historian, Dom David Knowles, admitted, "monks and canons of England had been living on a scale of personal comfort and corporate magnificence which were neither necessary for, nor consistent with, the fashion of life indicated by their rule and early institutions."

By the Act of Supremacy of 1534, the monarch became the head of the Church of England, able to appoint its leading officials and determine its doctrine. The Church would no longer be a part of an international organisation, but a part of the

British state, tamed and subordinate. Henry VIII permanently suspended the study of canon law in the universities.

A series of laws between 1532 and 1540 destroyed monastic life in England and Wales and in half of Ireland too. In 1535 Henry ordered visits to the smaller monastic houses to ensure that they shall "show no reliques, or feyned miracles, for increase of lucre". The Act of Suppression of 1536 ended 376 of the smaller houses. In 1538 Henry dissolved the friaries, which were centralised on the papacy. He dissolved the guilds, voluntary organisations where clergy prayed for the gild's membership.

The Injunctions of 1538 opposed "wandering to pilgrimages, offering of money, candles or tapers to images or relics, or kissing or licking the same, saying over a number of beads, not understood or minded on". In 1539 Henry suppressed the rest of the houses. The Injunction of 1547, Edward VI's first year, was to destroy all shrines, covering of shrines, all tables, candlesticks, trindles or rolls of wax, pictures, paintings and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry and superstition.

Every duty, it's good to publics, pilgrimages

The state finally dissolved the chantries – chapels where priests sang masses for the founder's soul – and abolished the laws against heresy.

In the parishes of England, all that sustained the old devotion was attacked. The church furniture and images came down, the Mass was abolished, Mass-books and breviaries surrendered. The altars, veils and vestments, chalices and chests and hangings all were gone, the niches were empty and the walls were whitened.

Land and properties were seized and sold to landowners and capitalist farmers, making the settlement impossible to reverse. Queen Mary tried to re-establish Catholicism, but without the support of the religious orders, Mary's effort was doomed. Her failure proved that there was no going back. Monasticism, a major factor in the medieval world ever since the fall of the Roman Empire, was over.

Bible in English

The Reformation made the Bible available in English, stimulating reading and the English language and ending the priestly monopoly of learning. It urged people to go back to the sources. It stimulated people to think for themselves, actively to compare and assess, rather than passively contemplate and acquiesce. Doubts were welded into a systematic and self-confident confrontation with all religious tradition, against all orthodoxy.

The Reformation enabled the development of science and of industry, of history and archaeology, promoting the rational investigation of empirical evidence instead of relying on texts and authorities, and ignoring the pressures from church and state. Amid the complexities and divisions of the Protestant world, there was more room to manoeuvre, to question and innovate.

Finally, the Reformation asserted the sovereignty and independence of Britain, a nation free from foreign ownership and control, "a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks", in Milton's magnificent words.

WHAT'S THE PARTY?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Step aside capital. It's our turn now.

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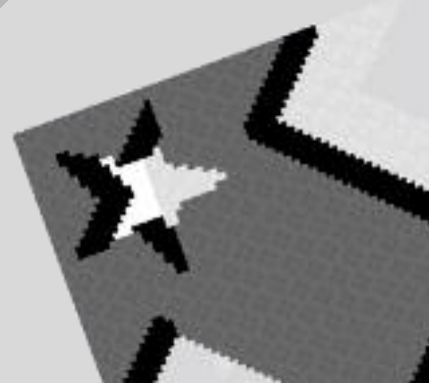
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Back to Front – Join the future

‘We need to bring our own thinking back in-house, take responsibility for it. Sod the Labour Party. They don’t care about workers and their unions, why should we care about them?’

ARE WE CASTING our eyes back over the year 2005 and looking forward to 2006, or are we looking back over the year 1905 and looking forward to 1906? OK, so there were no mobile phones, aeroplanes and celebrity love islands 100 years ago, but in politics we’re in an eerily familiar place there.

At the beginning of the last century working people in this country, the working class from whom we claim direct descent, took a momentous decision, and one from which we have yet to recover.

Our forerunners had suffered terribly from the effects of early industrial capitalism, which had visited death by starvation and transportation upon our great-great-great-great grandparents. But they had managed, against all the odds, to devise a means of defending themselves from their employer enemies: they invented trade unions, Britain’s single greatest contribution to the world. These unions succeeded in keeping alive our working class (and as a by-product the ruling, capitalist class which threatens it) by improving conditions of work. But they made a terrible mistake. They invented the Labour Party. Then they compounded matters by hiving off to that party the conduct of politics on our behalf. Things political were henceforth to be conducted in that outfit and not in our workplaces, in our unions.

The result was disastrous, and is with us still. Instead of our workplaces and tea breaks resounding to debate over how WE can bring about change, we have outsourced our thinking, sold it off to the highest bidder, the Labour Party.

That was 1905. The result was an ever-

diminishing grip on the world of work, and more glaringly, the world outside our workplaces. A whole paraphernalia of parliamentary flim-flam was created with wannabe MPs touting for our support and approval, that is until they get elected, when, as we all know, we (thankfully) won’t see them again until the next election-time. It has been forgotten that politics exists only in the clash of classes, which means in our workplaces, and class politics has been replaced with ‘leave it to the Labour Party’. If it goes wrong, denounce them instead of denouncing our stupid and cowardly decision to let them do it in the first place. If it carries on getting worse, maybe try another way of doing the same thing, a “socialist labour party”, a “labour representation committee”, a “campaign group”.

So that is 2005. We’re in the mess we’re in for one reason, and for one reason only. We need to bring our own thinking back in-house, take responsibility for it. Forget the Labour Party. They don’t care about workers and their unions, why should we care about them? Let those with a conscience and courage among that crew let it die; walk away.

Wilson and Callaghan led directly to the worst period in our modern history, that of Thatcher. Blair and then Brown would lead us to an even worse future, with decimated union membership and industrial destruction. If we let them. We call on those honest, puzzled and worried workers, many in and around the Labour Party, many still voting for it: walk away from the ruins of that party, join organised labour and its party, the Communist Party. And look forward to 2006.

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