

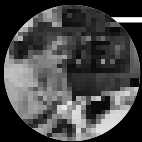
WORKERS

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JUNE 2005 £1



CAMPUS CONTRACTS FIGHT



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WORKERS

“ First thoughts: Nasty, but weak

RE-ELECTED FOR a second time, Blair wasted no time putting his cronies into jobs – even lavishing a peerage on policy adviser Andrew Adonis, the “brains” behind university top-up fees. Adonis, of course, was not elected by anyone. But then again, not many voted for a Labour government either: just 36%, or around 21% of the electorate, barely 1 in 5 of the adult population. Many of those hate Blair as well, voting Labour only because the alternatives seemed even less acceptable. But what, exactly, is more acceptable about Labour?

All the parliamentary parties stood on the same manifesto: capitalism. Whatever the flourishes round the edges, all are anti-worker, pro-privatisation and pro-EU. Labour is privatising areas even Thatcher could not touch, and Blair is even more war-hungry than Thatcher was. The gutting of Britain’s manufacturing industry has continued far faster under Blair. Why is one evil less than another, when both would destroy us?

But the election has left Blair as a lame duck, even if a rather nasty one. Expect more viciousness from him, but do not underestimate his weakness and his isolation, even from his own spineless party. Right now, Blair is besieged. His main strength is our weakness, our own lack of conviction.

Now, then, is the time for workers to demand a future for our industries, our

services, our country. The viciousness from No. 10 will keep coming only so long as we stay silent and do nothing. Given how worried they are by petty opposition in parliament, think what real opposition in action – in factories, offices, hospitals and schools – could achieve.

In that sense, the election was a low point for the working class, marked as it was by a shameful silence from most of the unions. While Rover workers lost their jobs and their pensions, the TGWU kept its head down. Others lay low, spending members’ money on support for Labour. To its credit the RMT continued with its march for rail, from Glasgow to London. Stopping in Birmingham, they invited Rover workers and pledged their collection to them – but not one Rover worker turned up to the rally.

The capitalist class’s house magazine, *THE ECONOMIST*, headlined over its election cover picture of Blair, “There’s no alternative.” But there is always an alternative. What if nobody voted? What if we had more democracy, more control over our country, than just marking a piece of paper once every four years?

The real alternative is staring us in the face. Stand and fight, for everything we have won in the past and for everything we have yet to win in the future. For jobs, industry, education and health. For class, country and control. For socialism.



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Cover picture: 17 May – NATFHE pickets demand the right to negotiate contracts of employment at London Metropolitan University © Andrew Wiard/www reportphotos.com

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Higher education walkouts

LECTURERS AT London Metropolitan University (LMU) walked out for a week last month in protest against the university's attempt to impose, under threat of dismissal, new contracts. LMU is an amalgamation of the former University of North London with the former London Guildhall University, and the new contract is an attempt to impose the inferior North London contract on former Guildhall staff – despite assurances at the time of the merger that the Guildhall contract would apply to all staff.

According to NATFHE, almost all its 700 members at the university took part, and were even joined by around 300 non-members. The dispute has the wholehearted support of the Association of University Teachers (AUT). The local student union executive has also given unanimous backing to the lecturers.

And as WORKERS went to press, lecturers at 13 further education colleges were due to walk out on 25 May. The lecturers are fighting to get the full terms of the pay deal drawn up in 2003 between NATFHE and the employers' body, the Association of Colleges. Their increases should have come through 10 months ago.

Meanwhile, the AUT has threatened to bring Glasgow University to a standstill if the employer decides to lay off staff. As many as 250 jobs across all faculties could go, as part of 'staff savings' and the university has refused to rule out compulsory redundancies. 150 jobs were lost by voluntary redundancy in 2002.

There is a similar threat to another college in Scotland. West Lothian College in Livingston is starting a process of shedding jobs through voluntary redundancies or early retirement. Staff have reacted angrily to the move, which comes less than a year after Sue Pinder, the college principal, saw her salary and pension package boosted by more than £30,000. According to the college's 2003-4 accounts, her basic salary for the year was £97,000 – up £26,000 on the year before. In addition, contributions to her pension scheme were increased from £4,000 to £10,000.

About 250 people work at West Lothian College, which moved from its previous base in Bathgate to a new campus in Livingston in July 2001. The £17.8 million site was funded through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Just a year after its official opening, it emerged that the college was making 13 members of staff redundant in order to cut costs. By then the college was already £844,000 in debt, and struggling to meet its annual PFI bill of £1.1 million. How many other colleges could be dragged down by PFI payments?

IRAQ Voting with their feet

THE UN MANDATE for the belligerent occupation of Iraq expires at the end of 2005 – and many of the countries are voting with their feet..

The Polish government has announced that it will withdraw its 1,700 troops by the end of the year. Bulgaria has said that it will withdraw its 462 troops by the end of December. Ukraine is pulling out its 590 soldiers this May. Italy says it will withdraw its 3,200 troops from September onwards. Spain, Honduras and the Dominican Republic have withdrawn their troops already.

But the Bush and Blair governments have set no exit dates, no end to this illegal and immoral occupation. They aim to stay indefinitely, regardless of all the lives lost, the costs and the risks. 87 British soldiers have now been killed in this unnecessary and counter-productive war.

ELECTION It pays to lose

THE TWO Labour ministers dumped by the electorate on 5 May, Stephen Twigg and Melanie Johnson, will receive 'redundancy' payments in the region of £200,000 each. This is based upon the formula of parliamentary salaries, allowances and pensions they would have received for being ministers. Not bad for an employment period of eight years!

In addition they will access one of the best pension schemes in Britain which MPs set for themselves in 2002. The pensions they will draw would require a purchasing power of between £175,000 and £200,000 on the open market.

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

EUROTRASH**The latest from Brussels****Get the story right!**

AT A TUC meeting debating the EU Constitution, Kinnock claimed it said nothing about "ever closer union". He's wrong. The Constitution's Charter of Fundamental Rights says "The peoples of Europe, in creating an ever closer union among them, are resolved to share a peaceful future based on common values."

We want a referendum

ON 18 MAY the latest Minister for Europe said Britain's referendum on the Constitution would take place whatever other EU countries decided. The same day, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw denied this, saying that it was up to the European Council to decide for us whether we should have the referendum. Straw said Britain had the legal and political obligation to ratify the Treaty through a referendum. This was wrong on two counts: one, it is a Constitution that we are being told to ratify; two, Britons can, and will, choose not to ratify it. Straw went on, "These obligations would continue unless and until the European Council makes a decision to abrogate these obligations." So according to him, the EU decides what we must do.

Abusing the holocaust

MARGOT WALLSTROM, a vice-president of the European Commission, accused opponents of the EU Constitution of risking a return to the holocaust. She said, "Yet there are those today who want ... the EU to go back to the old purely inter-governmental way of doing things. I say those people should come to Terezin [a Jewish ghetto] and see where that road leads." The last sentence was removed from the Commission website after widespread criticism. Those comments whitewash Nazism and denigrate nations who successfully fought for their independence against it. Nazism was not an assertion of national sovereignty, but the opposite – a counter-revolutionary assault on national sovereignty.

Mandelson has the last word

PETER MANDELSON recently told the WASHINGTON POST that a British 'No' vote in the referendum on the EU Constitution "will weaken me, and my role in the world." Thanks, Peter – another good reason for voting No.

POLICE**Civilian staff walk out**

DEVON AND Cornwall Police carried out an amazing climb-down after threatened pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year prompted an unprecedented outcry among 600 civilian support staff.

Staff abandoned their posts in protests in Plymouth, Launceston, Camborne and at the force's Middlemoor headquarters in Exeter when they learned of the proposed cuts. More than 400 support staff, including forensic staff, mechanics, traffic wardens and switchboard operators, gathered outside the force's headquarters. The local press reported that single mothers wept as they faced the prospect of salary

cuts, with many wondering how they would avoid losing their homes.

Staff were planning strike action but after meeting with the Police Authority, union representatives and fellow police officers, Chief Constable Maria Wallis announced a dramatic U-turn, allowing staff who had been threatened with pay cuts to retain their current level of earnings. Those recommended for pay increases will receive them with effect from 1 April this year.

Wallis admitted that the year-long evaluation exercise had cost £1.5 million but claimed the money had been spent on wage increases rather than the evaluation itself. She said that there would be an independent inquiry into why the evaluation took the route it did.

Bank workers to strike

AMICUS MEMBERS employed by HSBC Bank were set to strike as WORKERS went to press. The strike, on 27 May, is in protest at the proposed new pay and bonus scheme. Ten per cent of staff would receive no pay increase, 45% of staff would receive a below inflation increase and nearly all staff would lose out on the new bonus scheme. HSBC made nearly £9.6 billion in profit last year, has 1600 branches in the UK and employs 60,000 people.

At Lloyds TSB a consultative ballot by the union (LTU) of the 45,000 members employed by the bank has indicated an overwhelming majority to reject the recent 4% pay offer. Analysis by the LTU shows that 20% of the 70,000 Lloyds TSB staff did not or will not receive a pay increase this year. The union believes a significant number of staff have not received pay increases for three to four years.

This is a direct result of performance-related pay schemes. The other aspect to the Lloyds TSB offer is a further 3% to be taken in childcare vouchers or share options. Fine if your children are receiving a private education or you are a budding stock marketeer! But it reeks of the old practices which the Truck Acts outlawed – you can be paid but only spend it at the company shop. It may be high finance but it is still exploitation.

- Forty branches of the Leeds-based Yorkshire Bank and 60 branches of the Glasgow-based Clydesdale Bank are to be closed, with the loss of 1,700 jobs. Both banks are owned by the National Australia Bank, which bought them in the late 1980s. NAB announced the closures at the same time that it announced quarterly profit returns of £1.15 billion. The job losses equate to NAB "saving" £117 million.

A further 465 jobs are being shed by Lloyds TSB, a move described by the LTU as "offshoring by proxy". Work already shipped to India has created excess capacity in Britain. Further transfers of work to India are in the pipeline.

Some 6,000 bank branches have closed since 1990 due to the rise of call centres, internet and telephone banking. Like the closure of post offices, the impact on communities, especially rural ones, is significant. Other businesses and shops tend to close shortly afterwards, leaving areas isolated and bereft of social cohesion.

ITALY**'Horrible martyrdom'**

THE US INSURANCE company Banque AIG's analysis of Italy's circumstances in the Euroland financial never-never land reads as a nightmare. Italy faces a "horrible martyrdom", with possible 20% devaluation required as a desperate measure to avoid slump and collapse.

Italy's situation is compared to Argentina in 2000 just before the South American country crashed after pegging its currency to the US dollar. Italy is expected to break the EU's deficit ceiling of 3% by double that figure.

Italian exports have crashed by 30% since 2000. Public debt stands at 105% of GDP and is still rising – over US\$192 billion. "Draconian" cuts in public services are being mooted.



Classroom assistants picketing the entrance to the South Eastern Education and Library Board headquarters on the outskirts of Belfast on 13 May. They were delighted at the support they received from members of the public and other workers.

N Ireland fight against cuts

FRIDAY 13 MAY – unlucky for Peter Hain, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Barry Gardiner, Education Secretary, as thousands of non-teaching staff struck in Northern Ireland against education cuts. Spearheaded by UNISON and NIPSA (the Northern Ireland Public Services Alliance), with support from the TGWU, schools and libraries were closed and pickets were out across Northern Ireland, with rallies and marches in every major centre. A further ballot was under way on more extended action if the government fails to restore the cuts.

Many of the councillors sitting on the Education and Library Boards have resigned in protest against the budget cuts – an estimated £100 million over the next three years. The newly appointed Minister for Education in Northern Ireland, Angela Smith, was already on the defensive when interviewed on Radio Ulster on the day of the widely supported strike. Ten out of the eleven special schools in Belfast were closed on the day of the strike. Smith was asked why the £5 million could not be found to prevent cuts in special educational needs classroom assistants and other measures which would damage the education of children. She ended the interview by promising to look at the problems again and see if money could be found!

HEALTH

New minister, new privatisation

PATRICIA HEWITT, the new Secretary of State for Health, is a keen supporter of Euro-liberalisation. Within a fortnight of the election, she has proposed pushing ahead with increasing the proportion of operations on NHS patients carried out by the private sector, towards a target of 15%. This doubles the amount of money going into the private sector at the expense of the National Health Service. Unison's head of health, Karen Jennings, expressed the union's disappointment.

Unison's view is that operating capacity must be built up in the NHS. That this is the way to stop waiting lists building up all over again. Unison says, "The private sector will cherry pick the easiest

operations, leaving the NHS to carry out all the more expensive, difficult ones."

The president of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland has criticised government policies for "independent sector treatment centres". Billions of pounds will be siphoned off to private health corporations. The association's president, Robert Lane, said the private centres were undermining clinical services, they were "cream-skimming" the easy operations. The view was massively endorsed at the recent ASGBI Conference in Glasgow in mid April.

The Royal College of Surgeons also condemned the system, pointing to adverse effects the privatisation has on training of new surgeons. There will not be enough simple operations carried out in the NHS for junior doctors to develop their skills.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

JUNE

Friday 17 June, London

Pensions at the Crossroads – a one-day TUC conference.

This is a regular annual conference for trustees, trade unionists, pensions professionals and policy makers, but there should be added interest this year, as the pensions crisis deepens and the government and its policy advisers float ever more unpleasant solutions. The latest in May was that graduates would have to wait until 70 for a pension (by which time, perhaps, they may have even paid off their spiralling loans!). It's at the Stock Exchange... For a registration form, go to www.tuc.org.uk/pensions/tuc-9842-f0.pdf.

SCHOOLS

Twin blows to academies

THE GOVERNMENT'S academies programme received two hammer blows in May with the news that the Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough has been described by Ofsted as "failing to provide a good education" – and that staff at the flagship academy were balloting on industrial action against plans to cut jobs and introduce new contracts. The NASUWT says that the academy is planning to cut around 20 of its 98 jobs.

Academies were trumpeted as the way forward for struggling schools, usually in particularly deprived areas, and Unity was a flagship, one of the first three to be opened in 2002.

But the academies concept has a fault-line running right through it. Essentially, the thinking goes like this. Take a failing school, rebuild it as a state of the art modern facility (typically £20 million), and hey presto, problem solved – an expensive facelift that ignores the factors which caused the school to have difficulties in the first place.

These schools are required to raise £2 million from private sponsors, who can then use the school as a platform for the promotion of their own beliefs – hence the proliferation of academies that offer 'creationism' and other Bible-inspired theories as part of their core curriculum.

Despite protestations of good intentions, academies are not subject to the normal requirements of a school – such as employing qualified teachers and paying them the nationally agreed rate.

The manufacturing massacre continues

ONE MILLION British manufacturing jobs have been destroyed under Blair. There were 4.52 million in May 1997. Now there are only 3.52 million. Manufacturing jobs are down 3% in the past two years, the worst performance among the G7 countries – over the same period, such jobs were up 5% or more in the USA, Germany and Japan.

Every month 7,000 British manufacturing jobs are being destroyed. Manufacturing output fell by 1.6% between February and March, the worst month for a decade. And all the parliamentary parties conspire to ignore this continuous disaster, treating it as both unimportant and inevitable. When was manufacturing discussed during the election campaign?

Marconi

In April, BT announced that it had decided to award the whole £10 billion contract for renewing the telecommunications network to overseas firms, snubbing the British workers at Marconi. Yet BT had conducted a successful six-month trial with Marconi's advanced 'soft-switch' equipment and has conducted no similar trials with the contract-winning firms' equipment.

As a result, Marconi has already cut 800 jobs, with another 1,200 likely to go. Still, it's not bad news for everybody – Marconi's chief executive has cashed share options worth £8 million since last August. What is the government's response to the loss of jobs, of skills and of manufacturing potential? No action, no comment.

Motor industry

Storm clouds still hang over the car industry, following the loss of Rover and the equally damaging loss of 850 jobs at Peugeot in Coventry. Sales of Jaguar's X-type cars, built at Halewood, have dropped 29%. Coupled with the job losses at Jaguar in the Midlands, this should start alarm bells ringing. Britain now produces 30% more cars than it did in 1982, and with 50% fewer workers, but most car production in Britain is Japanese owned, with productivity and profitability soaring.

Ford

But Ford (US) is struggling; any crisis in the US will impact on Ford UK and Ford Europe. Profits have dropped by 38%, enough for Standard and Poor's (the credit ratings company) to re-classify Ford's debts of \$160 billion to 'junk' bond status, further hitting their stock value. General Motors has also had its credit rating undermined with its \$290 billion debt reaching 'junk' status. GM made a loss of \$1.2 billion on revenue of \$193 billion, and has not made a profit in Europe since 1999.

Critics of General Motors and Ford point to production methods that have remained basically unchanged for nearly 100 years, with no investment and little or no innovation or attention to the demands of the market. A million US workers, pensioners and their families are dependent on GM for its healthcare and pension provision. If General Motors or Ford staggers, the knock-on effect through industry will be huge.

The government certainly has its own agenda, is, what is the agenda for those who

What next for workers in

THE NEWLY ELECTED LABOUR government has its agenda for the health service, much of it unwelcome to health service workers. It has its origin in Tory policies – the Private Finance Initiative; Foundation Trusts; Value for Money; Independent Treatment Centres and finally, perhaps, abolition of Strategic Health Authorities. There is also a kind of unity amongst the political parties about some of the basic ideas on the health service. For example, that whilst it should be free at the point of need, the service requires for efficiency that the profit motive be introduced, extended and given a place of high standing within it.

Policies

Those of us working in the health service have to ask, why can we not force our policies onto the political parties, rather than constantly reacting to policies from them? If we are to raise this question we should have an answer. What would our policies be which we would seek to have a government carry out?

This would be a refreshing debate indeed, provided it did not drift off into the fantasy land of blueprints for the future which bear no relation to reality. We need to challenge our current thinking: improve it, raise its level and think things that we would want to see carried out in our name.

First, there is the extremely important question of overseas recruitment of nursing and other staff in the NHS. UNISON has been at the forefront of several magnificent efforts literally to rescue health workers who have been brought to this country under false pretences then mercilessly exploited while here. But is it government policies, albeit unofficial, unwritten ones, which lead to this international market in labour? We are encouraged to believe not only that such economic migration is inevitable, but that we should welcome it as something from which we benefit. It is true that workers who originated in other countries have crucially helped shape the British health service. But we have to look a little further, beneath the surface.

Trading in labour power

Many international companies are making a fortune trading in labour power. Recently the Nursing & Midwifery Council struck off more than 80 nurses who had been fraudulently brought to Britain for this transnational profit motive. When we say that we are opposed to private finance and the profit motive within the NHS, we should extend this principle to those companies making and seeking to make a fortune out of this merry-go-round of trading in skilled labour.

It is a merry-go-round: nurses being trained in countries abroad end up working in Britain, while many British trained nurses are now moving to better-paid jobs in North America and elsewhere. If one was really being cynical one might conclude that this movement of labour is being carried out in an attempt to keep wages to their lowest possible level.

Certainly the movement of labour provides organisational difficulties for trade unions in all countries, and it is heartening to see UNISON establishing contact with trade unions elsewhere.

We have to give far greater weight to our arguments, made already, that we are effectively denuding many developing countries of their most precious asset, skilled labour. It cannot be right for a country with allegedly the fourth largest economy in the world, Britain, to dispossess small African nations of more than half their trained nurses, not to mention the thousands who are drawn from other larger developing

own agenda for the NHS – privatisation and anarchy. The question
to work in the service?

in the National Health Service?



Photo: Andrew Ward/www.reportphotos.com

UNISON demonstrating in 2001 against introduction of a PFI into Bart's Hospital, London

countries. While nobody has yet used these words, it is in a way a new kind of colonialism.

Perhaps if we were really to have an ethical recruitment policy we would say that nurses trained here either have to work in Britain or in a less developed economy rather than nurses trained here going into a more developed economy, usually the USA, and that we would take from no country with a shortage skilled nurses.

At present, the only country with such

a policy in the world is Cuba, which exports nurses because there is a genuine surplus at home.

Food for thought

What of the structure of the NHS? While this is of importance, it is not something we should get bogged down in. We can and will organise ourselves in whatever structures there are, but it is important to know what is afoot. Structural changes have already been brought about on a large scale since 1997, and the fashion of

permanent change instituted by the Thatcher regime has been continued by Blair's. Thus we have seen the creation of primary care trusts (PCTs) and are perhaps to see their rapid diminution in number. We have seen the creation of strategic health authorities (SHAs) from the previously existing districts, and are perhaps now to see an abolition of SHAs.

In particular, in London this raises for

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us the question of a possible single, London-wide health authority or health management body which would be coterminous with the Greater London Authority. While this would of course create problems for our members working in SHAs and also PCTs, there is a logic in returning to a London-wide administration of health which was pre-emptively thwarted by Thatcher's destruction of all London-wide bodies with the exception of the London Ambulance Service and the London Fire Brigade.

Agenda for Change provides a means to establish a London-wide forum with health employers. Moves to a more succinct London-wide administration of health would provide additional impetus to this development.

Agenda for Change

Agenda for Change is the name that has been given to the current transition in health workers' pay and terms and conditions. These are not changes to be implemented before moving on to the next project. Unions will never move away from pay and terms and conditions as the central reason for being.

There will be constant attempts to improve the wage rates which are attached to the pay bands; constant attention to new and more numerous job profiles; continuing support and assistance to union members developing the knowledge and skills needed to put more pay into members' pockets. Crucially this whole process must be used to recruit to union membership and organise the workforce.

There were many encouraging signs of recruitment to UNISON health branches during the early stages of Agenda for Change. There is now some evidence that this is tailing off and it is hard to see the reason why. Now more than ever we need to be saying to non-members that they should join in order to raise their terms and conditions even further.

There has been much debate over the years about the iniquity of Thatcher's anti-trade union legislation. But perhaps the most iniquitous anti-trade union legislation of all is much older – that which prevents

‘ there is a logic in returning to a London-wide administration of health ...’

gains obtained by trade unions being confined to trade union members alone. In other words, if Agenda for Change with all its benefits were only to apply to trade union members then we would see a queue round the block of people wishing to join. Especially after its roll-out.

This experience is particularly borne out in new workplaces in the NHS where there is no history of trade union organisation. There, we have run the gamut of employers and unscrupulous workers wanting all the benefits without dipping into their pockets. We have seen attempts to set up project boards with directly elected staff representatives rather than properly accredited union reps. We have seen attempts to stack management-chosen “staff representatives” on to job evaluation and job matching panels and have had to politely say sorry, Agenda for Change is ours. It was created by the trade unions for health workers, and those who are not prepared to contribute should not take a role in forming the future.

Unscrupulous workers as well as employers have to be confronted. Unfortunately, in times of progress such as Agenda for Change, it sometimes brings out the worst as well as the best in health workers. Take the example of a London Ambulance Service worker who as a result of the assimilated pay rates, new unsocial hours payments and high cost area supplements would be gaining a pay rise of around £6,000 a year, perhaps even higher, who has decided to leave the union because it would place his union subscriptions into the higher band.

We should not indulge in some misguided debate about holding subscription levels in order to prevent

people from leaving. We need to take on these people and call them what they are – greedy. They have no place in trade unionism.

No set of terms and conditions lasts forever, and we know that Agenda for Change will be fought over just as the conditions provided by Whitley were. We also know, however, that strengthening our hand through trade union recruitment related to the roll-out of Agenda for Change is critical in strengthening our forces for the battles to come. While the job evaluation scheme is the best yet developed and is an excellent objective test of the relative merits of health workers' jobs, we can only guarantee that it will be implemented, as with health and safety legislation, in an organised workplace. Therefore it is our obligation to continue to recruit as it is our obligation to continue to breathe.

Asserting our interest

We have seen major advances since 1997, in most parts perhaps in spite of, rather than because of, any government intervention. What has happened is that we have been able to assert more of our interests than in the previous period. Certainly this is true of terms and conditions, although we have not won the battle in such important areas as foundation trusts and intermediate treatment centres. These latter are a particularly dangerous Trojan horse of private capital and we will no doubt see their growth.

Some practical questions for the future:

- If a private treatment centre is established, as many already are, in our hospitals, what should we do?
- How can we prevent developing countries from being denuded of skilled workers?
- How do we use Agenda for Change and all our other gains to build a trade union organisation so strong that the gains could not be rolled back by any future government?

Never mind Thatcher or Alan Milburn, the only people that the NHS is really safe with is us, those who work within it. Only we can take responsibility for it.

There is a catalogue of wrongs connected with school meals which only parents, teachers and school meals providers can address, writes a school meals worker...

School meals under threat

FOLLOWING JAMIE Oliver's TV series on school meals, newspapers have carried a series of attacks on them which may endanger their already precarious existence. One pictured a single sausage and some jelly purporting to be an entire meal. School cooks and kitchen assistants are furious about the constant knocking of their service in the media. As mums of children in the schools they take great pride in their work and would never allow a meal like that to go out from their serving counter. But they are also well aware of a serious problem they see in schools – a large number of children are not getting the nutrition they need to grow into healthy adults.

Let's get a few more facts into this debate. There is now no national system of school meals. Instead, there is great variation in the provision of school meals and it is changing constantly from year to year.

Schools as businesses

Government intends that schools are run as individual businesses, which local councils only monitor. So it may be consortiums of head teachers who decide initially what kind of meals will be provided and who will provide them, whether contracted out or in-house.

The local council decides whether there is a "junk food" option offered, whether the meal is to be produced on site, "mother-kitchen produced" and reheated on site, or perhaps to consist only of packed lunches, as in Essex. The local council also decides on the price that will be charged and what proportion of it goes to any contractor they may use.

Councils keep a good part of school dinner money to use as they see fit. The contractor, if there is one, may only get about two-thirds. The school may receive back part of the other third, to use as it sees fit. The head teacher may, or the local council may, have other priorities than children's nutrition at lunch time. Funds may be allocated elsewhere.

However, the really crucial decisions



about healthy eating are made at home, where children form their eating habits guided by parents. Parents also ultimately decide whether they will purchase school meals for their children. Where nutritious meals are on offer the children are likely to reject them in favour of junk food, given the opportunity. After starting to make his programme, Jamie Oliver rightly recognised that re-educating children and their parents about food was key to the problem. He offered only one option to the children, a healthy option which was often refused by children despite its quality. After a great deal of effort to educate the children in the classroom and their parents at home, quite a few of them were willing to try the food, but the word in Greenwich is that there was still much waste. Will the situation slide back to "normal" once the media attention is gone?

Many councils require their school meals service to offer several options, including one consisting of processed food which is salty and not nutritious, like burgers and chips. The healthy option goes into the waste bin, much to the dismay and regret of school meals staff. Meanwhile increasing numbers of parents are choosing to provide packed lunches, usually of poor nutritional value when compared with hot meals. Low take-up

threatens the very existence of school meals, leading some schools to use the kitchen space for other purposes and some contractors not to bid for work during the contracting process.

The cash injection promised by the government, earmarked for ingredients only, is an election gimmick, insecure, and wholly inadequate to address the size of the problem. Also, the idea that individual schools could organise fresh local produce from farmers in their area and prepare it on site, advocated by some green-thinking people, is simply not an option for the vast majority of schools which are in urban areas. Putting up the price of meals may well lead to lower take-up, already a problem, and the loss of contractors.

Lack of investment

School kitchens suffer from lack of investment, many using ridiculously old equipment. In some cases schools have decided to strip out their kitchens and use the space for classrooms or other functions. Sometimes a company wins a contract largely on the basis that they will install new equipment, with the proviso that they are allowed to raise the price of the food – something that happens mainly in secondary schools. Raising the price can lead to lower take-up and a downward spiral in the service.

There is a catalogue of wrongs connected with school meals which only parents, teachers and school meals providers can address. At its heart lies education and training, a working class looking after its own health. There is no quick fix. Trade unions can and must play a key role. Government intervention of the type we hear about at election time can only threaten the reputation and even the jobs of school meals staffs if fewer pupils take the meals, or if the contractors who employ them decide not to bid. School meals staff are certainly not the villains of the piece, but may stand to suffer.

Children also will suffer if school meals are replaced by pack lunches.

The choice is there for the working class: capitalism, religion, ig
responsibility for the future of the country...

No to state control – yes to a workers’ Britain

THE WORKING CLASS of which we are part has refused so far to face its historic task of replacing capitalism with socialism. It has chosen instead to chase the mirage of bourgeois parliamentary democracy (whether British or European) with its false promises of a better life. In clinging to illusions, the working class of the industrialised world is losing ground.

Being economical with the truth (now a tired phrase) has been replaced with veracity shortfall. This respectable parliamentary language should be treated with the contempt it deserves: Blair and Straw are liars – merely the latest in a long line of apologists for the capitalist imperialist system. But they were put in power by British workers, who were unwilling to contemplate the alternative – taking power themselves.

Rumsfeld lied that victory in Iraq would come swiftly, while he admitted in private that it would be “a long hard slog”. British troops are still bogged down in Iraq, their families waiting anxiously, and Iraqis are dying every day, while Blair dismisses the caveats in the Attorney General’s advice as a damp squib. Under all the charisma and the fake tan, the arrogance of the career politician will out.

Straw is already preparing the ground for an illegal Anglo-American alliance against Iran – this time involving the EU. Yet Iran, named as part of Bush’s “axis of evil”, has never attacked another country. Straw echoes the US government lie machine in an almost identical build-up to that of Iraq.

The conclusion of the International Atomic Agency’s Director-General, was that “Iran has no nuclear weapons

programme”. He repeated, “So far I see nothing that could be called an imminent danger, I have seen no nuclear weapons programme in Iran. There is no evidence that Iran has made a decision to build nuclear weapons.” Straw pretends it is all about upholding the UN Charter. He suppresses the fact that the Charter is about preventing war through respect for national sovereignty.

Why are politicians threatening Iran? Israel has nuclear weapons, and American bombs, but no oil, so other nations must not be entitled to a deterrent on equal terms. Nor take a stand independent of the US. Israel is part of America’s “aggressive foreign policy”.

Harnessing religion

Capitalism has its tentacles everywhere, and has harnessed religion and political correctness to moral superiority – in the service of war and the quest for oil – epitomised by the religious vote for Bush, who claims “to detect threats before they emerge” (does he have supernatural powers?), epitomised too by Blair’s personal belief in the rightness of war, the imposition of faith schools in Britain, and the criminalising of free speech by his Incitement to Religious Hatred Bill. Fundamentalist Islam, funded by big money, has created the war on terror as the perfect smokescreen for capitalist designs.

Post-Second World War Britain was an industrial, highly productive, and increasingly educated country, in which workers’ knowledge of the world and science was derived uniquely from the practice of their skills at the workplace, especially in engineering, toolmaking and manufacturing.

Then came the systematic dismantling of industry, speeded and promoted by Thatcher, and the accompanying loss of science departments in universities, followed by the even greater onslaught on manufacturing under Blair – a million jobs gone in the past eight years, most recently at Rover – without even a last-ditch struggle and barely a mention of the EU’s role in this.

Into the place vacated by industry



Opposition to the Iraq war was impressive at first

have stepped the pseudo sciences, such as creationism, a world view influenced by the scriptures which interprets the Bible literally and opposes the science of evolution. This American import is taught in some British schools, with Blair’s support, in science lessons.

Generations have stood for science, reason and truth against ignorance and superstition. And what have we got? Blair. And his cohorts in cabinet, like little vicars of Bray – whatsoever king may reign, etc – all waiting to ingratiate themselves with the next incumbent.

The unions, too, become sycophantic at election time. They are ominously silent about Iraq and the sabre rattling

‘Generations have stood for science, reason and truth against ignorance and superstition. And what have we got? Blair...’

This article is an edited and updated version of a speech given at the CPBM-L May Day Rally in London last month.

Ignorance and war – or socialism, where workers take

ain



st, but there have been only sporadic calls for troops out of Baghdad

over Iran. They once spoke out against the Vietnam War, but do not celebrate the great Communist victory that it really was against US imperialism. The unions are now among the hardest places in which to criticise the ideas that divide and control the working class.

Device for division

One device used by capitalism precisely for purposes of division is immigration – just the mention of the word reduces some in the unions to apoplexy and threats of violence. It is taboo. The government and the TUC have seen to it that the debate has been poor to non-existent. They concentrate on the crude fascism of the BNP, which is obvious to everyone. The underlying questions are, however, obfuscated.

The need for political asylum and asylum policy is not what is in dispute. It is the insatiable appetite of the employers

for cheap labour that is being suppressed in this debate. Meanwhile, the countries of origin of migrant workers – whether from Africa, Asia, Australasia, or Europe – are robbed of the chance to build up their own skilled working class.

The EU free-for-all, the tearing down of borders, will – if we let it – throw 450 million workers into the biggest piranha pool of cheap labour that we have yet known. But when workers attempt to knock down the shibboleths of European union, immigration, race and religion, they are denounced – as Little Englanders, imperialists, racists, xenophobes, lacking in respect.

In fact, avoiding the debate shows lack of respect for the intelligence of fellow workers.

Those who have lost their fishing fleets, or their manufacturing jobs, or seen farming reduced to a housekeeping exercise, know that the EU plays a far

from benign role in the world. At its treacherous heart lies unbridled capitalism, privatisation, corruption, and a military-industrial complex to compete globally for resources in the interests of the strongest powers in Europe – Britain, France and Germany. In the words of the President of Namibia: “These Europeans, they have formed a political union and again they want to get our raw materials without paying us.”

French and German arms manufacturers are pouring funds into the YES to the Constitution Campaign. They are dreaming of profits from war, in the knowledge that the Constitution does not require compliance with the United Nations Charter, the foundation of international law. The EU Constitution – unless we refuse to ratify it – would force Britain “actively and unreservedly to

Continued on page 12

Continued from page 11

support the Union's common foreign and security policy in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity". But there are pockets of the working class who are saying NO to war, to religion, to the election, to the EU, to being pushed around.

Opposition to the Iraq war was impressive at first, but there have been only sporadic calls for troops out of Baghdad. Blair was punished at the ballot box, but those around him have formed a consensus on regime change. Intervention in the affairs of others is the order of the day.

Parents and teachers in the US and Britain have had enough of religion being rammed down their children's throats. They have rumbled the Vardy Foundation: 70% said NO in Conisborough and there have been campaigns in London, at Abbey Wood and Walthamstow against Blair's city academies. In West Yorkshire, Ofsted upheld standards against a madrassah-style Islamic Institute for its over-emphasis on religion at the expense of other studies. In Monmouthshire a US-based Christian drug rehab group which was forcing teenagers to attend Bible study as a condition of receiving treatment had its grant withdrawn, on grounds of the misuse of public money.

The Incitement to Religious Hatred Bill fell partly because time ran out, but chiefly because of opposition in and out of parliament. Although millions went to Rome for a funeral, Italian churches remain half-empty, and in Ireland, there are few takers for the priesthood. Although Jean Paul was "great", people evidently did not agree with him on contraception, fertility treatment, AIDS

'If there is a French NO, we must demand a referendum to make it difficult for them to come back with a revised plan to force us to vote YES...'

(40 million affected worldwide), and so on. In other words, he was great – apart from his religion.

In Sri Lanka it was reported that thousands turned their back on religion after the tsunami. While Jack Straw said we were all at the mercy of nature, the Sri Lankans called for the technology of warning systems. In the US a federal judge ordered the removal of stickers saying "Evolution is a theory not a fact" from science books.

On the question of ethics, British peers have made progressive decisions, as on the vote in favour of new life to save the life of an existing child. British people in general do not like interference in morals, and we have a history of censorship battles (Mary Whitehouse, the Film Board, Lord Denning and Lady Chatterley).

The assertion of professional control, however, whether against our government or Brussels, is a form of resistance that goes largely unnoticed. An example of this is where childcare professionals have insisted on well-trained staff and qualified specialist teachers to work in children's

centres, exposing the government's Sure Start agenda as inadequate for children and patronising to parents. Or where tourist guides throughout Europe are taking charge of their training and standards, and have reached agreement not to encroach on each other's territory.

The RMT staged a march from the North to London for the re-nationalisation of the railways and against EU privatisation, but the election elbowed even that aside. Other unions, such as the Community and Youth Workers, have taken a stand against the EU.

Embarrassed

There is an embarrassed silence from politicians who clearly think France and Netherlands could vote NO to the Constitution – or Yes only by a small margin. There is over 80% opposition in Britain, but lack of debate is ominous. Blair has already indicated he might call off a referendum here. That would be to quash debate before we have barely started to have one.

If there is a French NO, we must demand a referendum to make it difficult for them to come back with a revised plan to force us to vote YES. And if our government won't hold one, the British people will have to organise their own. We must decide our own way forward.

We must end the intervention in our private lives and the non-intervention in industry. We must stop granting a mandate to politicians at election time to return with a capitalist agenda generation after generation. We must choose reality, not illusion.

NO TO STATE CONTROL – YES TO A WORKERS' BRITAIN!

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Will Podmore

Sixty years after the victory against fascism, a new book relates an American flying in England for the Canadians, getting shot down and then escaping all over Occupied Europe...

The man who wouldn't stay captured

IF YOU ARE reading a book at present, then line up *UNDER THE WIRE* by Bill Ash as your next. And if you don't read books, then change the habit of a lifetime and purchase this marvellous tale. As the words of its blurb say, it is "the wartime memoir of a Spitfire pilot, legendary escape artist and 'cooler king'".

For once, the hard sell is not overdone, as this book is both an education and a joy to read. Moreover, its publication is very timely given that this year witnesses the 60th anniversary of the victory against fascism – memories of those momentous, crucial events dim as the participants and

combatants in that conflict dwindle in numbers, so it is vital that personal memoirs such as these are printed to inform and inspire future generations.

"How, I asked myself as I looked for a field in which to crash-land, did an American, flying for the Canadians, fighting for the British, come to be blown out of the sky by a German, somewhere over France?" That reflection opens Ash's book which then seamlessly returns to flashbacks and recollections of his early upbringing in America that were to shape this remarkable man: "Dallas in the 1920s and '30s was a tough, boisterous town with one foot already heading for its oily boom-town future, but the other one stuck firmly in its western past."

The opening recreates a series of memorable, anecdotal moments from Bill's early life, such as: his scraps with school bullies; the 1927 parade in downtown Dallas watching the triumphant aviator Charles Lindbergh; the effect of the 1929 Wall Street Crash on himself and his father who was a travelling salesman selling ladies' hats; accounts of his numerous part-time jobs undertaken to support his way through high-school and Texas University; thumb-nail sketches of his family; declarations of his love of music and depictions of life for ordinary people in the "Hungry Thirties".

Then we progress to 1939, where Bill

discovers the wider America as he leaves Texas with not much hope of getting a real job in the depths of the Great Depression. "I drifted from place to place all over the Midwest for the best part of a year, mostly hitching rides in battered cars, but sometimes riding the rails and avoiding the railway 'bulls' who were employed to knock non-paying passengers off the freight wagons to which they were clinging." There follows a fascinating, riveting description of hobo life.

Evidently a quarter of a million men, women and children were riding the rails at any specific time during the 1930s and Bill's revelations convey a real feel for the details of that life, even to advising how and where to pick up a train.

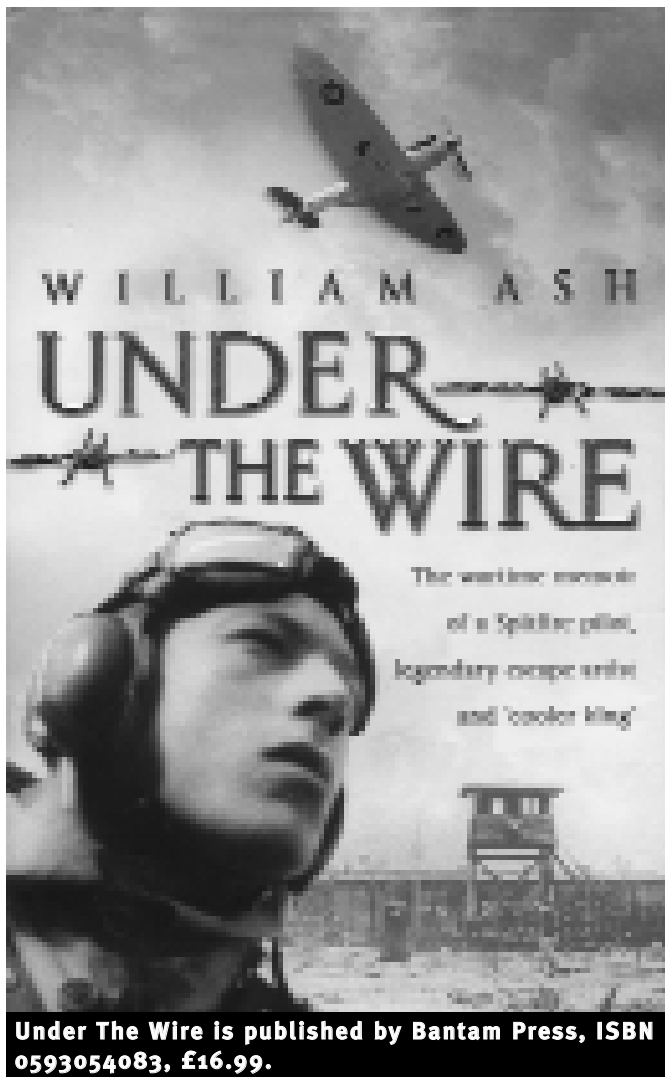
In early 1940 Bill arrives at the Hungry Man diner in Detroit, "a rough 'one-arm joint' where you leant on the counter with one arm and shovelled stew with the other." You could eat all the stew you could get on a plate for fifteen cents, but you were fined a dime if you left any on the plate. From here, Bill walked over the border bridge to Windsor, Ontario in order to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force and contribute to the war against Hitler. (Remember, the USA was not involved at the time.)

Eating well

Unfortunately, Bill did not pass the physical exam and was declared malnourished. He returned crestfallen to the Hungry Man diner where he borrowed 20 dollars from a customer, which he handed over to the cook "and took up residence at one of the tables. Every day, like a desperate man in an eating contest, I consumed everything they could shovel into me."

For two weeks he became something of a local landmark, before waddling back to Canada: "This time, however, when I stepped on to the air force weighing scales like a prize-fighter, the entire office cheered. I was in." His American citizenship and passport were revoked as the cost of enlisting to fight for Britain against fascism.

After a few months and 150 hours in



the inspiring story of
own over France —

the air training to be a pilot, “the powers that be decided I was safe to unleash on Hitler and awarded me my wings” and in early 1941 Bill arrived in England, a country in flames from the Blitz and under siege from the seemingly all-conquering Nazi army just a few miles across the English Channel.

Prisoner-of-war

These snippets give you a flavour of the first tenth of the book; but this review will only hint at and whet your appetite about the last nine-tenths in which the meat of his experiences as a Spitfire pilot and as prisoner-of-war are dealt with. There’s no wish to spoil your read, only to encourage you to pick up the book. Suffice it to say that Bill broke out of one prison camp only to be caught and despatched to the next – in Poland, Germany and Lithuania.

These years of hardship are described along with countless examples of courage, humour, humanity and irresistible desire for dignity and freedom. A wartime autobiography, it is also a moving tribute to the bravery and resolve of an entire generation.

Resonance

To conclude, with the final paragraph of the book, and a message that still has resonance to us today in different but equally dangerous circumstances: “I was back in England and on solid ground – the same ground I had flown over and fought for just a few years and what felt like a lifetime earlier. From up there in the cockpit of a Spitfire with the sun at my back, the land below had all looked peaceful, permanent and still, whether the timeless curves of the River Thames, the medieval spires of Lincoln cathedral or the ancient monolithic circles at Stonehenge.

“It was a rich prize, and worth fighting for, but the real prize had been the people, an entire generation from all parts of the globe who had taken quiet, personal decisions that had shaped their future and sometimes cost their lives. Together they had decided that the world deserves better than fear, stupidity and greed. People can soar as well as any Spitfire.”

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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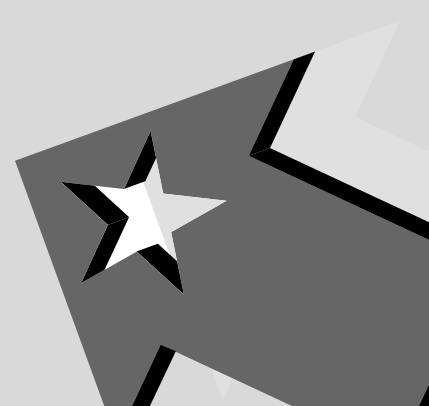
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Back to Front – The centre cannot hold

‘While in every other aspect of their lives people in northern Ireland say Yes the DUP continue to say No to everything and Sinn Fein continue to thrive on their saying No...’

IN HIS POEM “The Second Coming” W. B. Yeats wrote: “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold”. And though the recent Westminster and local government elections in northern Ireland were not exactly what he had in mind, his words were nonetheless prophetic.

The latest gains in these elections by both Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein would seem, at first glance, to represent a further polarisation of unionists and republicans into antagonistic camps hell-bent on mutual destruction. It should have been accompanied by a visible rise in tension and dark mutterings in blacked out city streets and unlit country roads.

Should have been, but wasn’t. For the vast majority it was as if the elections had taken place in another country, a country that they knew by reading about it in the newspapers but that really they weren’t that interested in.

The days since the signing of the Belfast Agreement have brought about a strange paradox, represented on the one hand by the number of votes cast for the DUP and on the other by the success of the cross-border rail service which has more than trebled the number of passengers carried in that time. While in every other aspect of their lives people in northern Ireland say Yes the DUP continue to say No to everything and Sinn Fein continue to

thrive on their saying No.

And so nothing changes. Direct rule continues and with it the continued destruction of the education service; the closure of public libraries; the longest NHS waiting lists of any region in the United Kingdom; the mania for target-setting and cost saving; the destruction of traditional industries; and the introduction of water charges to mask years of neglect and lack of investment.

To add insult to injury, northern Ireland has imposed on it the dreadful Peter Hain as the new colonial overseer to make sure Labour policies are pushed through by a set of ministers who are accountable to no one but themselves.

That is the real story of the election in northern Ireland. With direct rule continuing, the DUP can pose as a party of principle safe in the knowledge that it can always blame the government for the destruction of public services, rather than trying to lead a campaign to save them.

These are the real concerns of workers in northern Ireland, concerns that barely got a mention in the manifestos of the political parties other than as afterthoughts hidden by vast swathes of red, white and blue or green, white and orange. And, as the story on page 5 shows, it is the workers organised in their trade unions who will take to the government the fight to save what is really important.

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