

workers power 5



**Beppe Grillo
stuns Italy**



**Bedroom tax:
Can't move!
Won't move!**



**Chávez
legacy**

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Monthly paper of the British section of the League for the Fifth International

Jerry Hicks: 'Let's transform Britain's largest union'

In an election that could rock the lab, rank and file candidate **Jerry Hicks** writes for Workers Power

Jerry Hicks

THERE'S AN ELECTION in Unite, Britain's largest union with 1.5 million members. Nothing unusual in that. But it's been called three years early and on the shortest possible timetable.

The official reason for the change was to avoid a clash with the General Election in 2015. Instead of using the opportunity to put pressure on Labour to adopt some pro-union policies for Unite's millions in party funding, Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey brought the election forward because Labour don't want to be seen in hock to the unions (I wish!).

So why not bring the elections forward 12 months to 2014? He said he wouldn't stand for a second term, but he is. The truth is, Mr McCluskey is enjoying the trappings of power.

The snap election – called in December, just before the mid-winter break, with nominations closing in February – meant no other official had time to organise a campaign and a rank and file outsider stood no chance.

When I was made aware of the election, I asked myself who would I support? There was no one from the officer class I could support. A shoe-in candidate, similar to Gordon Brown, looked like a done and dusted deal. So I took soundings amongst union activists and

decided to stand. If I didn't, the rhetoric would be wound down and the strikes wound up as we moved towards Labour's election.

We passed the first hurdle with flying colours: 136 nominations, from every region. Mr McCluskey has a thousand. But last time in 2010, he had eight times the nominations, but only twice the votes. I came second out of four candidates, beating two assistant general secretaries.

Differences

This time it's just a two-horse race and the contrasts are stark. Mr McCluskey is subservient to Labour and thinks it can be reformed. So he keeps giving them more money. I say, keep every

penny of our money, tightly clenched in our fist, and not hand it over until after the event, when Labour adopts union policy.

Mr McCluskey has the view that we should appoint officials. And once in position, they can be there for life, at the behest of the General Secretary, who can promote them – like Gail Cartmail, who ran against him last time. Or the candidate who finished last, who was given £250,000 to leave the union.

I would have elected officials. Members among the printers, council workers, bus drivers, health members, in finance – it's they who know our problems and should elect who should represent them, not a panel of officials.

Community branches, which organise unemployed and workers in unrecognised sites, are good. But they're too few and too small – we need to improve. The General Secretary should remind us more often that it's not our crisis.

My Community Branch has agreed with bedroom tax campaigners that we'll be there to stop evictions. That's direct action. Don't pontificate about direct action and move on to the next lecture theatre, Mr McCluskey.

My first strike was in defence of the NHS – secondary action. It's illegal now; we've been criminalised. I'd rather be inside the law than outside, but I'd rather be on the right side: our NHS, our schools, members' families. It should be our right to decide when to strike and not to be told. We have failed for too long to defeat the anti-union laws imposed by Thatcher but unchallenged by Labour and Unite.

Coordinated strikes are fine things, but they need to be sustained so others can join in – to join the dots – and add their demands to win a decent pen-

sion or avoid a pay cut.

It's members who should drive disputes. They're the ones affected, not the officials, so they should control disputes, their decisions sacrosanct not secret talks or other unions' decisions, as happened with the pensions.

They know unity is strength. They could have won a victory, not left other unions, the PCS, NUT, in the lurch. Leaders should lead, members' should control.

The sparks

So, in construction, eight rogue employers broke the national electricians agreement, covering wages, sick pay, all sorts of things. They gave notice. But the officials said, wait. The sparks didn't.

Within 10 days, 500 electricians in London made a decision what to do. They elected their own committee. I was honoured to be the only non-electrician elected.

Direct action: roadblocks not rhetoric. And they won a magnificent victory, the rank and file group. Every sector in Unite should have their own rank and file group, resourced by the union but only by officials at the rank and file's request.

These are huge differences. One gets £122,000 a year, £2,000 a week, and was appointed to union positions for three decades. I will take an average workers' wage, £26,000 a year. During those decades I was involved in strikes and occupations and that's the difference: as a member, not official of the union. I turned the offer down to be a union official on principle.

The things that go well, we'll improve: more democracy, more control. So the next Vestas, the next Olympics, the next British Airways, we will make the judgement right over wrong, whether it's legal or illegal, ballot or no ballot. Two candidates, one vote – our chance.

Unite election: 18 March - 12 April

Eastleigh by-election: a wake up call for the left

Rebecca Anderson

David Cameron once dismissed the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) as “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists”. But in the Eastleigh by-election, the Tories realised they had to get down into the gutter to outbid the “fruitcakes” in Europhobia and racism, fielding Eurosceptic Tory Maria Hutchings.

It was all in vain. Sheer xenophobia is UKIP’s whole stock in trade. UKIP focused their campaign on immigration, but also played the anti-foreigner card by pointing to the relocation of the local Ford factory to Turkey and the building of a new housing estate, which candidate Diane James falsely insinuated was for European Union (EU) migrants. Though the Lib Dems kept their seat, UKIP scooped 27.8 per cent of the vote, trouncing the Tories and pushing them into third place.

Austerity to blame, not immigration

UKIP came close to winning their first MP by blaming the poverty that people are suffering under the austerity of Cameron, Osborne and Clegg on EU migrants, threatening that up to 29 million Bulgarians and Romanians could move to Britain in 2014.

Labour was nowhere to be seen in this election, despite being the main opposition party under an unpopular government. They maintained their modest 9.2 per cent share of the vote, but completely failed to capitalise on the corruption and sexism scandals rocking the Lib Dems or the cuts and closures threatening Eastleigh’s working class.

Of course UKIP offers no solution to factory closures or housing shortages beyond leaving the EU, but the mainstream parties are complicit with the economic policies that have led to them. Without a credible working class party fighting austerity and laying the blame for it where it really belongs, people in their thousands fell for UKIP’s racist lies.

TUSC strategy under fire

So where was the left-of-Labour message? Well there was the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), which got 0.15 per cent of the poll – or 62 votes.

As Socialist Resistance member Liam Mac Uaid pointed out on the Left Unity blog:

“You’ve probably never heard of the Christian Party (Proclaiming Christ’s Lordship) but in the Eastleigh by election last week their 163 votes was more than the 62” that TUSC won. He continues: “This electoral formation which brings together the two largest groups on the British far left and the RMT was even outperformed by the Elvis Loves Pets Party’s 73 votes. If you were looking for a comprehensive demolition of the far left’s electoral strategy Eastleigh is where you will find it.”

And his conclusion: “If the left takes one lesson from Eastleigh it must be that it has to start pulling together an electoral challenge that will push the debate back onto an anti-capitalist, left of Labour terrain.”

TUSC supporter Nick Wrack of the Independent Socialist Network goes further: “We need a party that tries to build support for its policies throughout the year, so that if it stands in an election it has built up a profile

and standing. Candidates like Daz Procter deserve more than this. The anti-cuts movement, the students, those on workfare, disabled people, pensioners deserve more than this. It is no good the different bits of TUSC campaigning the rest of the year in their own name and then hoping to get a decent vote. We need a party that people can join and help to build. The model followed by TUSC at the moment is leading nowhere. A serious discussion is required.”

Revolutionary unity

And he’s right: parachuting “united left” candidates into every by-election, when everyone knows the left is far from united, is the wrong starting point. It is quite simply trying to harvest where you have not sown.

For revolutionaries, electioneering is a way to measure achievements in the real class struggle: in the workplaces, in local communities, and in the leadership of national campaigns. The Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and the RMT may indeed have real if modest achievements here, but the barely-recognised TUSC brand name obscures them. Indeed, what has TUSC done between elections?

For continuity and an identifiable presence, we need a party: not just single issue campaigns like Keep Our NHS Public, or local campaigns to save a library here, an Accident and Emergency ward there, and not just imitation united fronts at a national level,

like Unite the Resistance or the Coalition of Resistance.

A party that offers leadership and policies that assist in all these concrete struggles, whose members are amongst

their best militants, and which can draw people around it into common action in these struggles will more than likely not get such a derisory vote.

Organised into branches in factories, offices, schools, hospitals and housing estates, such a party would not simply disappear after polling day, and could make all the difference to the class struggle in Britain today.

Today we do not have such a party. But it is clear that we do need one, capable of taking the anti-cuts, anticapitalist message to a mass audience. To achieve one, the left must unite and work together to offer an alternative.

This means a party that unites all those who really want to halt NHS privatisation and the Bedroom Tax, who want to drive the Tories and Lib-Dems from power through direct action; and who are not afraid to condemn openly and unambiguously the scandalous prevarication of the trade union leaders in the face of the greatest assault on the working class in a generation.

Rather than standing as TUSC in elections and the rest of the year trying to build rival anti-cuts and trade union campaigns, the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, and political militants in the RMT and many other unions should call a conference to draw up a basic programme of action against the cuts. This would be a step towards the formation of a new workers’ party that could discuss, debate and decide a strategy to fight for socialism, while spearheading a fight to drive out the Coalition government. That is what we in Workers Power are fighting for.

For revolutionaries, electioneering is a way to measure achievements in the real class struggle

DEFEND YOUR HOME AGAINST THE



Stuff the bedroom tax

Joy Macready

“Can’t move, won’t move!” Drawing on the historic chant against the Poll Tax, this is the rallying call for a new movement against the latest vicious attack by the Coalition against the poorest and most vulnerable.

The bedroom tax, which comes into effect in April, will see families, single mothers and disabled people judged

to be “under-occupying” their council properties lose an average of £16 per week in housing benefit. People who are already on the poverty line will face being thrown out of their homes for having a spare room.

Speaking at the Benefit Justice Summit, WinVisible activist Claire Glasman recounted how Camden council cut off her housing benefit because she refused to fill out the bedroom tax form.

Launched by unions and campaigns including PCS, Unite, Disabled People Against Cuts, Defend Council Housing and Unite the Resistance, the summit attracted over 100 people to discuss the fight against the bedroom tax, workfare, cuts to Council Tax Benefit and the loss of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

Sara Newton from the Liverpool Anti-Bedroom Tax Campaigns explained two months ago only 10 activists called an initial meeting of over 100 people in Dingle. They discussed ideas ranging from lobbying to organised defence, with phone trees to mobilise against the bailiffs, taking inspiration from the Spanish eviction blockades.

At a second meeting, they agreed to support a march called by activists in Bootle and vice versa. Now there are plans to set up a cross-regional federation.

More than 250,000 PCS members are set to walk out on Budget Day, but the civil service union should also organize its to make implementing the bedroom tax a near impossibility.

Other unions should organise unemployed branches for the many longstanding union members tossed onto the dole heap, as well as the young people being forced onto workfare. They could educate a whole new generation of trade unionists by touring sixth-form colleges to explain what is or isn’t legal under the workfare scheme.

Climate change: the other crisis of capitalism

By James Copley

A recent US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) report shows CO2 emissions rising to the second highest time on record in 2012.

While largely caused by the expansion of coal-fuelled power plants in the developing world, it won’t have been helped much by US and UK plans to expand shale gas extraction.

Another factor in the lowest absorption of CO2 by the world’s oceans, which normally absorb between 30 and 50 per cent of all atmospheric CO2, is a consequence of global temperature rises.

The proposed feedback loop, where increased temperatures make further increases easier. The impact of climate change in the form of extreme weather patterns, droughts, floods and blizzards can be understated.

The 2009 Kyoto Protocol aimed to keep global temperatures within 2°C of

pre-industrial levels. But current estimates for the next few decades point towards a 2.5 to 4.5°C rise. From transportation to electricity production, society needs a revolution in how we interact with our planet.

High efficiency, integrated mass transportation involving trams and local bus and train services would reduce the need for mass private car ownership.

Investment in renewable energy sources and mass conversion from gas to electric domestic heating would significantly reduce pollution. We could also abandon the waste of disposable commodities, and produce goods that are durable, environmentally friendly and long lasting.

But we cannot undo the damage that capitalism has done to our planet without overcoming the market, which only values short-term profit and simply cannot plan on the timescales that the protection of natural systems needs. It will take a planned economy under democratic workers’ control to ensure a future for ourselves and our children.

UK economy: 20 years of pain?

Marcus Halaby

The Tory government's new Budget, due on 20 March, will be the focus of a TUC evening rally against austerity, supported by Shelter and the Child Poverty Action Group. Called A Future for Families it will be addressed by TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady and Labour Party deputy leader Harriet Harman.

It will highlight cuts to public services like Sure Start centres and the National Health Service, punitive cuts in tax credits and benefit caps like the "Bedroom Tax", likely to affect 670,000 households by an average of £700 a year.

This comes as Chancellor George Osborne has pushed through a tax cut for the highest earners, from 50 per cent to 45 per cent, and as austerity threatens to tip Britain into a triple dip recession.

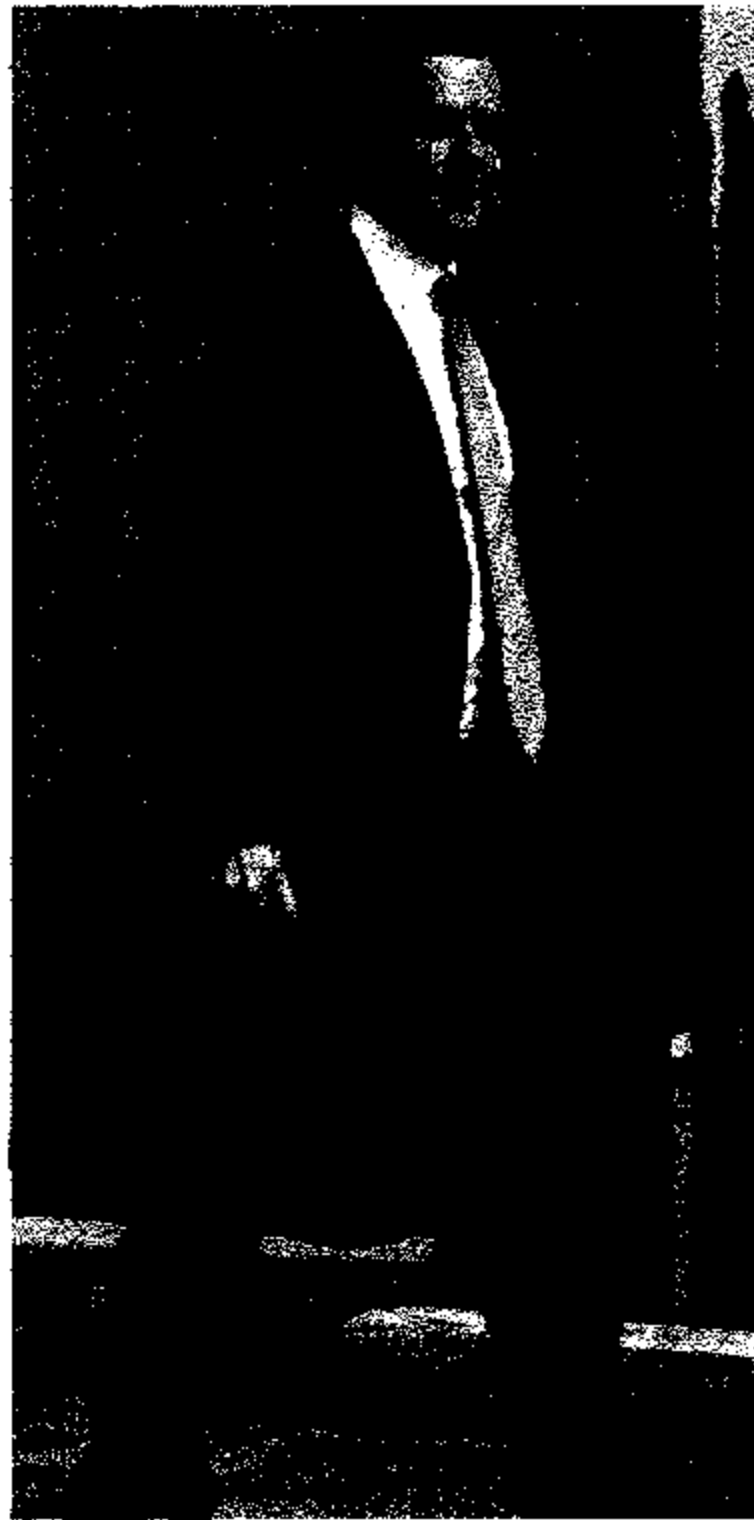
A recent United Nations report has revealed that Britain has "an exceptionally high degree of inequality", with the richest fifth earning 10 times more than the poorest fifth, making Britain the most unequal country in the Western world. This income gap between rich and poor is similar to Nigeria's, and goes alongside evidence that the poorest fifth of people in Britain are worse off than those

in other Western countries, earning roughly the same as their equivalents in Hungary, 32 per cent less than their equivalents in the United States, and 44 per cent less than their equivalents in the Netherlands.

Much the same story emerges from other sources. A report commissioned by the Labour Party reveals that Britain has seen average real wages decline in the last two years at a rate faster than any European Union country apart from Greece, Cyprus and the Netherlands, while a TUC report shows British workers suffering the biggest drop in real wages (nominal income adjusted for inflation) of the world's wealthiest economies, worse than in Italy or Japan at 4.5 per cent between 2007 and 2011. The bulk of this decline took place during 2011, in the first full year after George Osborne's autumn 2010 spending review.

Stock market rise

At the same time the FTSE 100 Index of Britain's largest publicly traded companies reached a five-year high on 8 March, anticipating signs of employment growth in the United States, while the Japanese Nikkei index has recovered to its level prior to the global financial crisis that brought down Lehman Brothers in



Osborne's budgets have cut the living standards of workers and boosted the wealth of the rich

September 2008.

The FTSE had previously achieved a two-year high on 4 January, despite poor growth in Britain's banking and

services sectors, again in response to US economic news. Globally, share prices are at their highest since mid-2008, before the recession began.

What this adds up to is something that any socialist or working class militant should easily be able to understand: that Tory austerity has been aimed to hit working class people – and the poorest in particular – in order to restore profitability for capitalist corporations and the rich.

And yet the much-promised recovery has not yet materialized. The inflation that is eating away at the value of our incomes – again, hitting the poorest the hardest – is at least partly a result of low interest rates and "quantitative easing", policies it is claimed will stimulate the economy by encouraging lending and investment. Yet the largest industrial and commercial companies are sitting on a trillion pound "corporate cash mountain", hoarding their reserves, using their customers and suppliers as a source of credit, and reluctant to rely on the banks to lend to them when required.

The banks, for their part, have done much the same, using the supply of artificially cheap credit to try to repair the damage done to their balance sheets by a financial crisis that stemmed from the results of a whole

previous fifteen years of artificially cheap credit.

On some projections, UK gross domestic product – the value of all goods and services produced – will not return to pre-recession levels until 2017, almost a decade after the "sub-prime" lending crisis that heralded the global financial crisis of 2008.

Lost generation

Worse still, as columnist Fraser Nelson of the right wing Spectator magazine has noted, Osborne's budget bases itself on an assumption that real incomes will not return to pre-recession levels until 2027.

They might not shout about it, but the Tory government's policy of austerity and cuts needs us to suffer a whole 20 years of stagnant or shrinking wages – exacerbated by the destruction or marketisation of public services – to make it work.

Anyone whose knows anything about Japan's "lost decade" of stagnation in the 1990s should regard this as a wake-up call. We are already seeing the features of that period here and now: of an increasingly precarious job market, with millions forced into part-time or temporary jobs or bogus "self-employment" by a toughened benefits regime, alongside mass youth unemployment.

Unite the struggles and tear down the coalition

Jeremy Dewar

DAVID CAMERON could yet meet his poll tax moment. His latest outrage, the bedroom tax, is igniting massive discontent. The Welfare Reform Act includes an attempt to snatch back housing benefit from anyone deemed to be living with a spare bedroom, including disabled people and low-income families.

In areas like the North West tenants cannot "downsize" to one-bedroom properties because there's not enough of them. So a movement is emerging, which is beginning to look like the anti-poll tax unions, with mass meetings on estates, telephone trees to mount emergency blockades against bailiffs, and a renewed sense of community fighting spirit.

Social movements

The NHS cuts, closures and privatisation are also meeting mass resistance. Mid-Staffordshire and Mid-Yorkshire hospital cuts have seen mass meetings, protests – and strikes at the latter. East Midlands Ambulance Service cuts and closures at Lewisham, Ealing and

Whittington in London have all provoked big and angry demos.

At long last a national demo in defence of the NHS has been called, and is supported by Unite health workers. If we can mobilise all the local campaigners in London on 18 May, if we can follow through with strikes and occupations at all the threatened wards, services and hospitals, we can save the NHS.

Add to these burgeoning social movements the crisis in the fire brigade, with dozens of stations and hundreds of engines being axed, further rounds of council cuts affecting youth clubs, libraries, meals-on-wheels and more, and further attacks on the education system at school, college and university level – and it is clear the government's austerity programme is far from finished.

So we need to intensify the fight back nationwide!

The first chance we will get to do this is on Budget Day itself, when everyone is expecting a further £10 billion of cuts to be announced. Demonstrations have been called in most towns and cities, while hundreds of thousands of civil servants will be on strike over pay, pensions

and working conditions.

These days of coordinated action could lead on to a permanent collaboration in the People's Assembly, which has been called for 22 June in London. It can provide the spur to launch local People's Assemblies, where activists, trade unionists and youth can meet, learn from each other and decide how to take the struggle forward. It can

We propose that all the left groups should unite around a basic programme of action against austerity

give a practical answer to the TUC's "investigation of the practicalities of a general strike".

Rank and file

If we have learned one thing from the past three years of mobilisations, it is that the trade union and Labour leaders cannot be trusted to stick the course. Some won't even get to the starting blocks. We have to prepare for action independent of the union tops if they will not

fight. The left wingers like Mark Serwotka in the PCS and Kevin Courtney in the NUT may have called more strikes than Dave Prentis in Unison and Paul Kenny in GMB, but even these have been timid affairs, lasting no more than a day.

The biggest of them all, Len McCluskey of 1.5 million-strong Unite, combines verbal fireworks with the fire hose when it comes to real action.

That is why Workers Power, the SWP and the Grassroots Left are backing Jerry Hicks in the election campaign for Unite general secretary. Here is a chance to break the mould of UK trade union politics by electing a rank and file candidate.

Party and power

But the lesson of the magnificent struggles in Greece, Spain and Portugal over the past three years is – protest must lead to power, resistance to revolution.

We need to forge a new party of the left: one that fights to make the bosses and bankers pay for their own crisis, to stop and reverse all the cuts; cancel the debt and nationalise the banks, without compensation and under the control of the

working people; one that will tax the rich and create real jobs on trade union rates building school, hospitals and houses.

The crisis that has engulfed the Socialist Workers Party shows that small propaganda groups of a few thousand activists, who give themselves all the trappings of parties but without their social weight in the workplaces and communities, simply will not do.

We propose that all the left groups unite around a basic programme of action against austerity. If we can do this, thousands of others, new and old, will join in, because they will see a real opportunity for political unity open up.

Of course this would only be a beginning. A new party would need to set up a programme commission to develop the ground for broader and more lasting unity.

And most importantly it would have to be internationalist, reaching out to left parties and groups in Europe and across the world. This crisis is global in scope because it is a crisis of the whole system. We can only succeed if we set as our goal the fight for a new, fifth International.

PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY: make it a council of resistance

The Coalition of Resistance has called a People's Assembly in June. Already it looks as if it will be big. But, asks Jeremy Dewar, will it unite the movement against austerity in the action we need?

DURING THE three years of cuts and closures, privatisation and poverty the Coalition government has inflicted on the working people of Britain, there has been one constant, popular theme: we need unity in action.

Whether it be the TUC demonstrations against austerity marching through London in 2011 and 2012, the co-ordinated public sector pension strikes, or the spontaneous "Yes we can!" that many thousands shouted when the TUC asked about the "practicalities of a general strike", workers and activists have seized every opportunity to press for a united fight against the government.

When the Occupy London movement took over the square in front of St Paul's Cathedral in late 2011, we also saw an outpouring of support and millions inspired by the slogan, "We are the 99%" – another expression of the desire for unity.

What is the Assembly?

This is why the Coalition of Resistance call for a People's Assembly in London on 22 June has already received large-scale support, which is only likely to grow.

As we go to press, still three months before the event, dozens of big names have signed up to it. Ten union general secretaries will speak, from Bob Crow and Mark Serwotka on the left to Dave Prentis on the right.

Add to them well-known left-wing writers, such as anti-war campaigner Tariq Ali, Owen Jones author of

Chavs, filmmaker Ken Loach and journalist John Pilger, which shows that the People's Assembly has pulling power.

The Labour Left MPs John McDonnell, Jeremy Corbyn and Katy Clark will mount the stage alongside Caroline Lucas of the Green Party, whose conference has agreed to send delegates and to encourage local parties to do likewise.

So much for the celebrities. A wide range of left parties and groups, trade unions and trades councils and student unions are also responding to the call.

The Communist Party of Britain (Morning Star newspaper), Counterfire and Socialist Resistance are behind the event. Unite the Resistance, controlled by the Socialist Workers Party, is tentatively seeking involvement too. Some of the more left-wing student unions, such as SOAS and UEA, plus the month-long occupation at Sussex University, have agreed to send delegates, as have various union bodies and trades councils.

Workers Power supports the calling of the Assembly, hoping that it can become a launch pad for united class-wide action. What we do not need is yet another rally for tub-thumping rhetoric. We believe there is the potential for the People's Assembly to become a real conference of the anti-cuts movement.

It is good therefore that the model motion produced by the organisers starts from the TUC Congress reso-

lution to bring together "a coalition of resistance taking coordinated action where possible with far-reaching campaigns including the consideration and practicalities of a general strike", saying the People's Assembly was called "in support of the aims of this resolution".

The model motion then goes on to say the Assembly "aspires to build a movement for social justice and develop a strategy for resistance to mobilise millions of people, through trade unions and local community organisations, against the ConDem government."

Great! So how do we achieve these objectives – with what methods and tactics? How can we ensure that the union leaders will carry them out?

Obstacles

Our starting point has to be a balance sheet of those used so far by the labour movement's leaders – particularly the 10 general secretaries attending the Assembly. Collectively they have sat on their hands as the Tories privatise the NHS.

After the 30 November 2011 pension strike, where 2.5 million public sector workers struck, they refused to fight, letting the unity fall apart. Dave Prentis led the way, actively sabotaging it, settling within a couple of weeks for the same package of cuts!

There was a real opportunity to build a huge movement against the NHS and Social Care Bill last year, aimed at privatising the health service. Just one rally on the eve of Lans-



ley's Bill passing through Parliament was all the TUC and the main health service unions could muster, not even a national demo.

Meanwhile local activists and health workers, have launched magnificent popular local campaigns to defend healthcare in places like Lewisham and Whittington. The Mid-Yorks NHS workers have waged a militant strike. But they have all been left to fight alone. The union leaders, left and right, have done nothing over the past three years to build movement that could stop Cameron and Clegg in their tracks.

We have to ask what they propose to do now to defend the NHS and public education system, local services and the unemployed, to reverse the freefall in real wages and to take concrete steps towards forcing the TUC to call general strike. We must do more than ask – we should pass clear policies on the 22 June to unite the movement around a strategy to defeat Tory austerity, and demand the leaders back it with action.

We should also be wary of the political perspective of the main initiators of the Assembly. Counterfire is the split from the SWP, led by John Rees and Lindsey German, who along with

Andrew Murray from the CPB led the Stop the War Coalition. They led the great 15 February 2003 mobilisation of two million whose tenth anniversary we have just marked.

But then there was no follow through. General secretaries packed the platform then too, and roused the crowds with their oratory. But the organisers put no pressure on them whatsoever to launch a wave of strikes, which could have made the war impossible to wage.

Instead, Murray and German launched a People's Assembly, which seemed like a great initiative. But when it met – still in time to mobilise actions against the war – no resolutions were allowed, apart from an anodyne declaration from the top table.

Workers Power moved an amendment to "build People's Assemblies in every town and city" in order to coordinate strikes and direct action, and we won 40 per cent of the votes. Indeed without frantic signals from the SWP stewards to their members to vote against, it is likely the amendment would have been passed.

The danger is that this happens again, that the Assembly's organisers limit its agenda to what is acceptable to the union leaders and MPs.

Use the assembly to fight for a general strike

THE PEOPLE'S Assembly represents the best opportunity we will get this year to launch a united anti-cuts movement, and fight for a general strike to stop all the cuts and break the Coalition government.

It's not too late to stop austerity. The bulk of cuts are still to come, while the Coalition is more fractious and divided than ever. If you hit it hard, driving in a red wedge of class struggle, it will probably splinter. Indeed the reason it's survived so far is that the union executives have only hit it with coloured balloons – and even then not very often.

What is needed is a mass movement from below to draw together social campaigners and trade union activists to bring solidarity to each others' struggles and link them together. We can see this

happening already around the NHS and fire station closures.

Local Peoples' Assemblies in every town and city – newly created or emerging from existing campaigns or trades councils – can begin to do this now, in preparation for the national Peoples' Assembly, and keep going after it. They could draw in delegates from the NHS defence campaigns, the movement against the Bedroom Tax, anti-academies groups, etc., as well as delegates from local union branches and workplaces, aiming to develop powerful councils of actions like those that underpinned the 1926 General Strike.

Without such a united national anti-cuts coalition, the local anti-cuts groups that sprung up in the first couple of years of the Coalition government have stagnated or disappeared. They had no national

horizons, coordination and power like the Stop the War Coalition or Anti-Poll Tax Federation provided, which massively boosted the development of local groups.

And there is no reason why local assemblies could not initiate struggles and even strikes themselves.

The sparks' movement and Jerry Hicks' election campaign both show that the current crisis provides openings for resourceful and determined activists to score real victories.

But we also need a strategy to win, centred on the general strike. An all-out general strike would break the Coalition. We should demand that the 10 general secretaries – who represent over half the trade union movement – name the day for a general strike, and pledge to fight for it in their respective unions and the TUC.

It would be a disaster to limit the People's Assembly to what the general secretaries will agree to on the day (or behind the scenes). That is why the People's Assembly should set out to build a democratic movement from below that could push the union leaders to organise a general strike – or take control of calling one ourselves if they refuse to.

This is what Workers Power fights for. We don't underestimate the obstacles. But we also know the price of failure: in an era of economic stagnation, and increased rivalry between the big capitalist blocs it means the destruction of the welfare state, the driving of millions into poverty. Help us campaign for an Assembly that relaunches the resistance, with a strategy that can drive out the Tories and the Lib Dems.

The fight for women's liberation: the Bolshevik experience

In celebration of International Women's Day, and as part of an ongoing debate about the principles of women's organisation and the revolutionary movement, **Joy Macready** looks at the history of early Soviet Russia and its lessons for today

THE MARXIST position on women's liberation owes a great debt to a remarkable group of women in the pre-1914 Second International, particularly in the German and Russian Social Democratic parties (the SPD and RSDLP).

First amongst these, and the real pioneer of the socialist women's movement, was Clara Zetkin. She launched the socialist women's paper *Die Gleichheit* (Equality) in 1891 and founded the women's bureau of the SPD in 1907. She also pioneered the calling of the first International Socialist Women's congress in Stuttgart in 1907 and thereafter the adoption of 8 March as International Women's Day in 1910.

In Tsarist Russia, Alexandra Kollontai, at first a member of the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP, alongside Inessa Armand and Nadezhda Krupskaya, both members of the Bolshevik faction, took up the task of organising working women. Kollontai wrote a series of articles on the nature of women's oppression and the sort of movement that was needed to combat it.

In *The Social Basis of the Women Question* she argued: "The struggle for political rights, for the right to receive doctorates and other academic degrees, and for equal pay for equal work, is not the full sum of the fight for equality. To become really free, woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive. For women, the solu-

tion of the family question is no less important than the achievement of political equality and economic independence."

She went on: "Where the official and legal servitude of women ends, the force we call 'public opinion' begins. This public opinion is created and supported by the bourgeoisie with the aim of preserving 'the sacred institution of property'. The hypocrisy of 'double morality' is another weapon. Bourgeois society crushes woman with its savage economic vice, paying for her labour at a very low rate. The woman is deprived of the citizen's right to raise her voice in defence of her interests: instead, she is given only the gracious alternative of the bondage of marriage or the embraces of prostitution – a trade despised and persecuted in public but encouraged and supported in secret."

Free love

Kollontai also criticised radical feminists, who posed the question of liberation from the family as a matter that daring individuals could achieve if they banded together under slogans such as "free love". She points out that only a limited number from the more privileged classes could break free of the family and organise new free forms of family life. For women of the lower classes this was materially impossible.

"Only a whole number of fundamental reforms in the sphere of social relations – reforms transposing obligations from the family to soci-



Alexandra Kollontai

ety and the state – could create a situation where the principle of 'free love' might to some extent be fulfilled... Only the fundamental transformation of all productive relations could create the social prerequisites to protect women from the negative aspects of the 'free love' formula... the task of caring, alone and unaided, for her children.

"The feminists and the social reformers from the camp of the bourgeoisie naïvely believing in the possibility of creating new forms of family... tie themselves in knots in their search for these new forms. If life itself has not yet produced these forms, it is necessary, they seem to imagine, to think them up whatever the cost."

In short, she used the arguments Marx and Engels used against the utopian socialists against the feminists: that is, dreaming up "recipes for the cookshops of the future", rather

than starting from the potential within modern capitalist production and transforming it into the basis for socialising domestic life.

Kollontai accused the feminists of covering up class differences and seeking to divide the working class, holding out a false unity of women workers with their "enemy sisters", bourgeois women.

Even today, Kollontai's critique goes to the very heart of Marxism's differences with feminism.

Early Soviet Russia

In the years just before the First World War, women in the Bolshevik party launched a women's paper, *Rabotnitsa* (the Woman Worker). It first appeared in 1913, but had to cease publication when the war broke out.

In early 1917, Kollontai joined the Bolsheviks, and after the October revolution was appointed People's Commissar for Welfare. In November 1918, Kollontai, along with Armand, Krupskaya, Konkordia Samoilova and others, organised the First National Congress of Women Workers and Peasants.

Kollontai fought for a women workers' bureau to be established to look into women's issues and the particular concerns of women workers, but faced opposition from inside the party. She was accused of capitulating to bourgeois feminism – an argument that has ironically been taken up by Alex Callinicos against the SWP oppositionists recently.

But Kollontai had a strong supporter in Lenin, who said: "The Party must have organs, working groups... with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence... We must have our own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation, and special forms of organisation. This is not bourgeois 'feminism', it is a practical revolutionary expediency."

In 1920, the Women's Section or *Zhenotdel* was set up. Its opening conference attracted over 1,000 delegates, many of whom were peasants who travelled for days on foot to attend. In the first year they made inroads into dealing with female specific unemployment, abortion rights and work on prostitution.

Up until 1923, *Zhenotdel* created a series of institutions to liberate women from the oppressive family – maternity units, nurseries and communal kitchens – as well as educating and involving women in political life. *Rabotnitsa* was re-launched and women's pages were introduced in the regular mass papers.

But *Zhenotdel* could not escape the general problems of the Russian revolution: bureaucratisation and the purging of the leading activists of the revolution. Kollontai was an early victim and found herself removed from the leadership of *Zhenotdel* and then effectively exiled to Norway. *Zhenotdel* was eventually dissolved in 1930. But its legacy remains.

Marxism versus feminism

REVOLUTIONARY communists start from the view that working class women are the central agency in the struggle against their own oppression, aided at every step by class-conscious working class men.

As Lenin wrote: "We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves."

If all women are oppressed, they are not all equally oppressed and not all women have the same degree of power to end their oppression. Women, like men, are divided into classes. The women of the ruling class offload most of their oppression onto their working class "sisters" and their privileges will always tie them to defending their class before their sex.

Lower middle class and professional women suffer more oppression and have a long history of struggle:

the history of feminism. Many of the issues feminists raise are very important: violence against women, sexist ideology in culture and education, the hypocrisies of male chauvinism and religious morality.

But their solution, an all-class women's movement seeking solutions within capitalism, mean that they cannot get to the roots of the problem: the bourgeois family and capitalist production, on which this family rests and for which it reproduces the workers' capacity to work and brings up a new generation of workers (i.e. housework and childcare).

Working class women partly escape from the isolation of the family home through wage labour, where they join unions, a gateway to social and political life in general.

Of course, the burden of domestic labour still weighs heavily on them and in the unions they still encounter sexism and discrimination, but they are no longer atomised.

For this reason Marxists set as their goal the socialisation of domestic labour and childcare as reforms today. But to fully achieve this will require an economy, democratically planned by everyone, so we can ensure men play an equal role in both spheres and involve the young themselves as a part of their education, paving the way for real social equality.

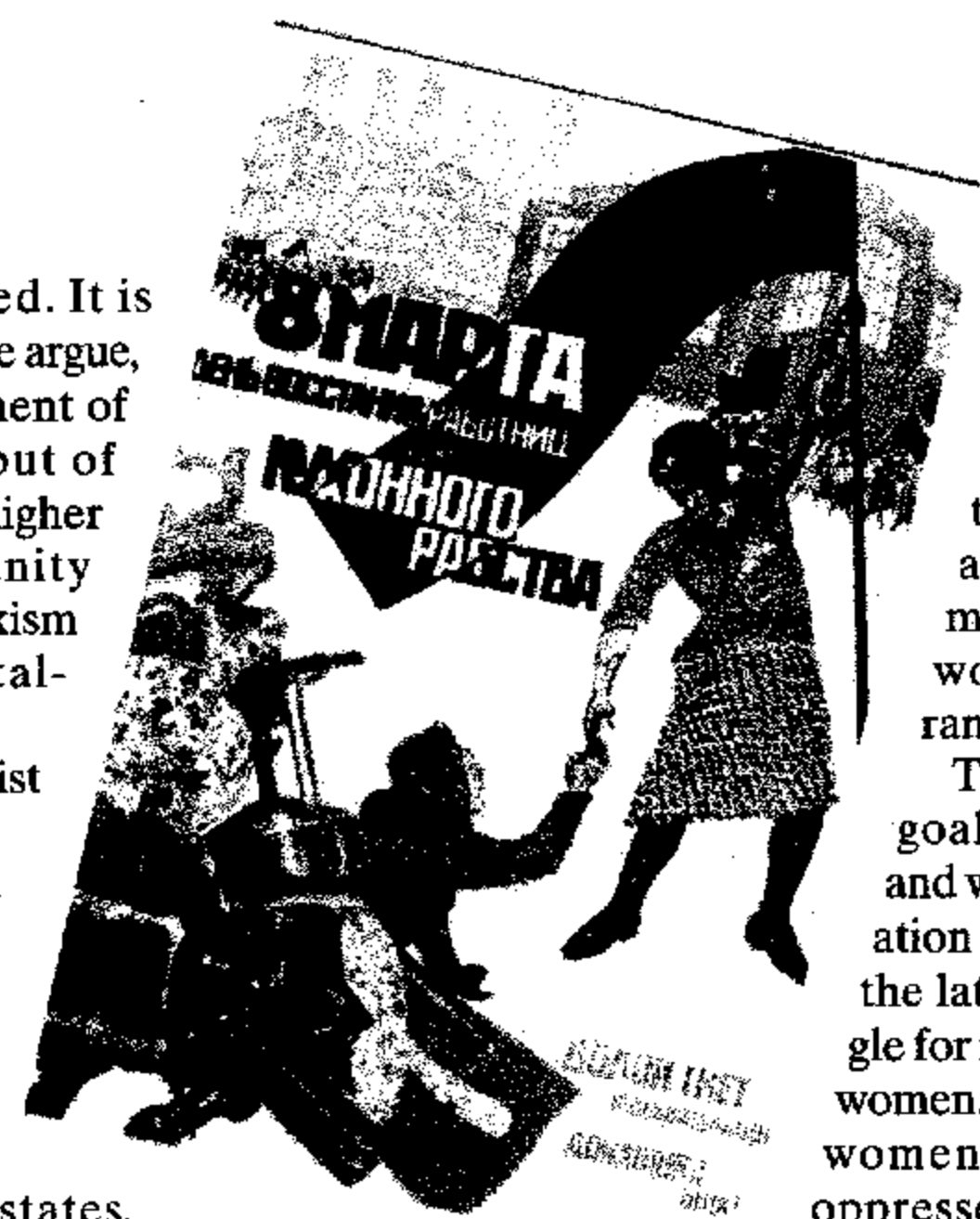
To fight for this perspective we need not only a revolutionary party and trade unions but a socialist working class women's movement to take up the whole spectrum of women's oppression: domestic violence and rape, discrimination at work, abortion and contraception, inequalities in pay, inadequate childcare and healthcare, sexist culture. In short, a modern day *Zhenotdel*.

Another vital weapon in the struggle against sexism is the right of women to organise among themselves in workplaces, unions and parties. This right to caucus should be

guaranteed. It is not, as some argue, an instrument of division but of unity at a higher level: unity against sexism and capitalism.

A socialist women's movement would draw in women in unions and housing estates, schools and colleges, uniting them in a common struggle. They must have democracy and autonomy, with the right to elect their own leaders, not subject to dictation by any party.

However, a genuine revolutionary party would openly intervene into



such a movement, hoping to win the majority to its course of action, and more and more women into its ranks.

The common goal of socialism and women's liberation indicates why the latter is a struggle for men as well as women. But as long as women remain oppressed, they have the right and the duty to organise themselves.

Socialists cannot say to women that their liberation must "wait for socialism" or that it will only be a by-product of the economic and political class struggle. On the contrary, it is a vital and integral part of it.

Italian Elections: a shock f

Italians turned out in their millions to reject the austerity politics imposed by the Eurozone bureaucrats and their main man, Mario Monti. But beyond that, they only managed to reveal a deep crisis running through the country. All eyes are now on Italy to see what happens next, especially those of Europe's political elite, aware that the Eurozone's third largest economy cannot be allowed to slide into chaos.

Dave Stockton looks at the dangers and opportunities lodged in the current situation, and investigates the Beppe Grillo phenomenon. Is he a tribune for the poor and a force for the left, or is he a stalking horse for right wing authoritarianism?

STOCK MARKETS fell and EU leaders reacted in horror as the results came in from Italy's general election on 24-25 February. Their hoped-for winners, "responsible" parties that would continue to push austerity, had failed to win a working majority in parliament. Eurocrats had hoped the austerity programme of cuts and neoliberal "reforms" designed by the previous Mario Monti government would continue to shore up Italian capitalism and the euro.

Instead the Italian people, long denied elections, have rejected austerity at the first opportunity, raising the spectre of another round of political instability and deadlock in Italy. As the Eurozone's third largest economy, this would likely pitch the entire region back into crisis.

The Eurocrats' hopes lay in Monti and Pier Luigi Bersani. At the height of Italy's last debt crisis in November 2011, the former European Commissioner Monti was made a "Life Senator" by President Napolitano, and invited to form a government of economic "experts" to replace the thoroughly discredited media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, whose right-wing populist government had delayed making cuts for years. Monti's unelected government has imposed austerity on the Italian people for 15 months, supported by Bersani.

Bersani's Democrats, the largest descendant of Italy's once two million strong Communist Party, long ago ditched any ideological connections to communism. But it still has the support of Italy's largest union federation, the Italian Confederation of Labour (CGIL), which has put up only the feeblest resistance to Monti's reforms.

The Eurocrats' calculated on passive union support for a Bersani-Monti government, freed from reliance on Berlusconi, and able to continue the austerity programme. But their preferred candidates fell far short of a popular majority; Bersani's centre-left alliance received 29.55 per cent of the vote and Monti's alliance a humiliating 10.56 per cent.

Worse came with news of the unexpectedly high vote (29.17 per

cent) for Berlusconi's populist coalition – he has brazenly reinvented himself as an opponent of "German" austerity – and that of the comedian Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S), who won 25.54 per cent of the popular vote. Grillo's campaign attacked not only the EU austerity plans but entire Italian political elite, left and right.

Thanks to Italy's undemocratic constitution, even Bersani's wafer thin lead over Berlusconi was enough to give him 340 of the 617 seats in the lower house, over half! That, however, is not enough to form a government because the constitution gives the upper house equal law making powers.

Corriere della Sera (Italy's most prestigious bourgeois newspaper) groaned that the country was, "ungovernable." Other foreign observers insisted that the Italians – like the Greeks and the Irish before, must vote again till they got it "right", a government acceptable to the markets and EU bankers.

Grillo: no deal

Bersani and the Democrats immediately tried to court Grillo but he contemptuously rejected Bersani's overtures. He stated his movement would not enter a coalition with any of the other parties, which he expects to form a coalition and further discredit themselves, forcing elections and an outright majority for the M5S, sweeping away most of the old politicians.

"We'll go into parliament and we won't even think of messy deals, not even teeny weeny messy deals. We'll be an extraordinary force and we'll do everything that we have said we'll do in the election campaign. Citizen's income, let's start by being alongside the most vulnerable: nobody must get left behind. Let's start to use different words. There'll be 150 of us inside and a few million outside. We'll start to do what we've always said – our stars: water in public hands, schools in public hands, public health service. If they follow us they follow us. If they don't, the battle will be very harsh for them, very harsh."

But Grillo's stance has provoked a

revolt amongst his own followers. 150,000 signed an online petition calling for him to open a dialogue with the Centre Left alliance led by the Democratic Party. It will be interesting to see how the supposedly superior model of "virtual" democracy works and whether Grillo will succumb to an online plebiscite.

Crisis of leadership

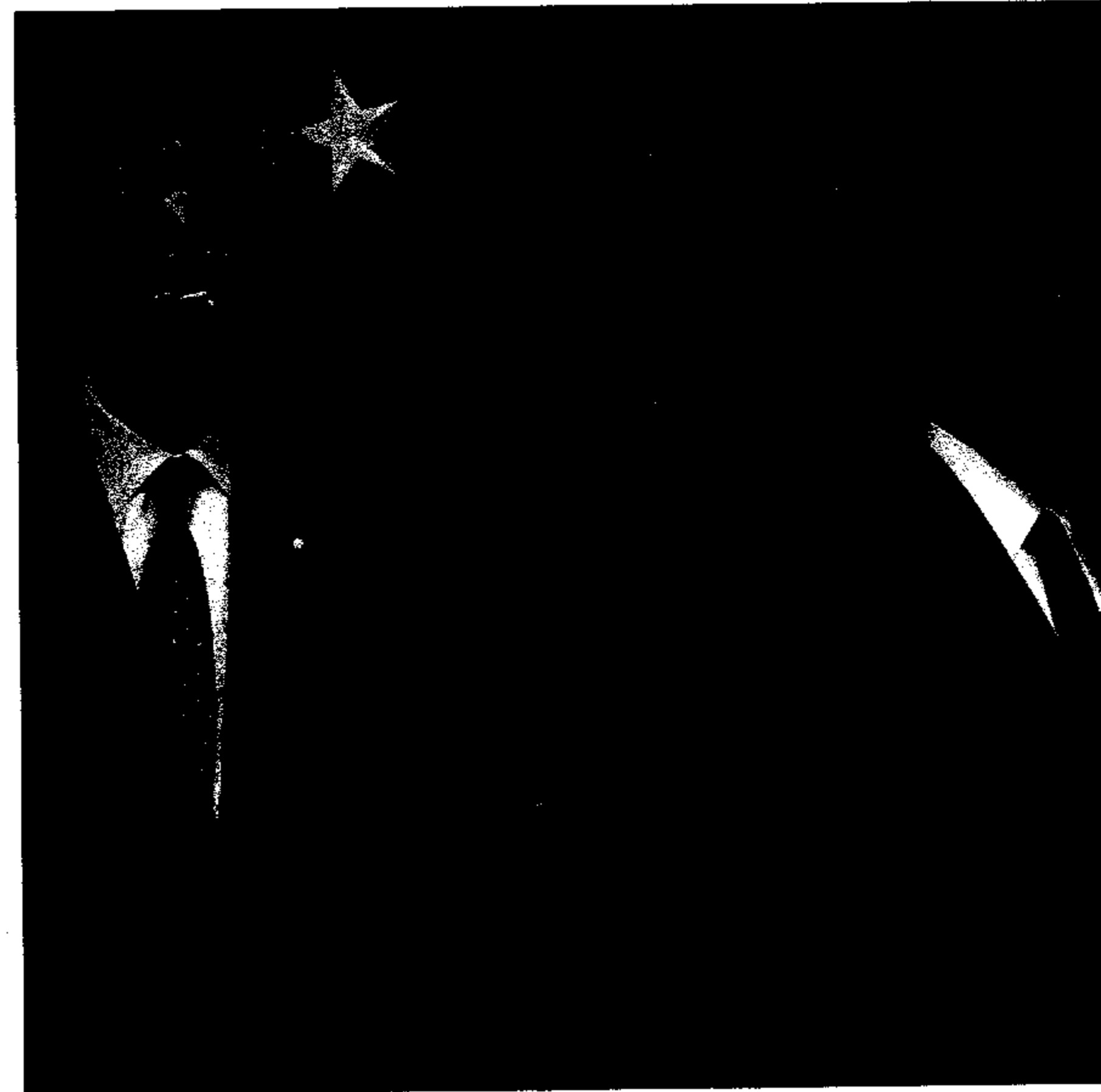
Whatever the parliamentary arithmetic produces, the most important issue in the Italian election is that the labour movement was unable to take any advantage from the obviously widespread opposition to the government's austerity programme.

The reason is plain enough. The Democratic Party supported Monti's reforms more consistently, even more enthusiastically, than Berlusconi. In this, Bersani is following the pattern of the whole European centre-left; utilise the support of the official labour movement to get elected with vague promises of stimulating the economy, then carry out the austerity policies demanded by the financial and industrial elite of big capital. Labour in Britain will prove no different!

Meanwhile, in Italy as in most other European countries, the bureaucracies of major union federations, like the CGIL, stifle resistance or, at best, turn it into once or twice a year "days of action" or impotent parades. Even FIOM, the traditionally more militant metal workers section of the CGIL, which showed a more militant stance under Berlusconi and even talked of the need for a new working class party, fell silent under Monti. The failure of the official left and the big unions to defend workers explains in large measure the rise of the likes of Beppe Grillo.

The Italian left has failed

But even more striking is the abject failure of the anticapitalist left of the first decade of the 2000s. These forces – left reformist, libertarian and self-styled revolutionaries – did create a truly mass movement of workers and youth, which was able to mobilise millions on the streets against war and neoliberalism. What they could not



Opposite directions? Mario Monti, who only gathered 10 per cent of the votes, and S

do was build a political party with a strategy for defeating the various bourgeois governments and for posing the question of power for workers and youth. Instead at the heart of the left stood Rifondazione Comunista (RC).

In the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s RC played a prominent role, not only in Italian politics, but also on the European Left. It was widely regarded as a party model to emulate, just as Syriza in Greece today. What has happened in Italy over the past decade is a warning to those with illusions that a reformist-party, whose strategy is a parliamentary road to power, will some how or other find the right road for the working class, especially if it is "plural" i.e., has reformist and revolutionary tendencies in its ranks. If they think this will save all the time-consuming efforts of building parties on a revolutionary programmes the sorry history of RC proves otherwise.

Those who took part in the mobilisations against the G8 in Genoa in 2001 and the Florence European Social Forum in November 2002, heard RC's main leader, Fausto Bertinotti, reject the two years when RC had supported a government led by the Christian Democrat Romano Prodi, and promise "never again!"

Yet, in 2006, RC not only supported but also actually entered another Prodi government, citing the need to keep out Berlusconi. Bertinotti was rewarded by the presidency of the lower house and RC reciprocated by supporting Italian participation in the occupation of Afghanistan and the extension of a huge US air base near Vicenza to

help it wage the war on terror.

The result was a series of splits by the left from RC, followed by a catastrophic defeat for the party in the 2008 elections, when Berlusconi was elected after all and RC lost all its deputies and senators. In that election, RC then stood as part of the Sinistra Arcobaleno (Rainbow Left) a mini-popular front with small anti-corruption and green parties. It received 1,124,428 votes (3.08 per cent). For the first time since the Second World War, not a single deputy calling themselves a Communist was elected to the Italian parliament.

In 2013, RC tried the same tactic forming another popular front with the equally uninspiring name Civil Revolution (Rivoluzione Civile) headed by Antonio Ingroia, previously an anti-mafia mayor from Palermo. This alliance received only 765,172 votes (2.25 per cent).

So why has the left, reformist and revolutionary, failed? It can be summed up in one word: opportunism, the pursuit of supposed short-term objectives, at the cost of the longer term interests of the working class as a whole. The alternative can also be put briefly: "No support for any government of the ruling class", i.e. any government that will make the workers pays for saving the system.

Rifondazione's repeated inability to break from the policies of forming class collaborationist governments with the excuse of "keeping out the right", brought about its electoral downfall as well as disorganising and frittering away the strength of the Italian left at a national and local level. Unless the Italian left dumps the whole rubbish of the popular front,

or Eurocrats – and the left

The Beppe Grillo phenomenon

THE ITALIAN general election did not give a majority to any party or coalition – but it did produce a clear winner: the Five Stars Movement (M5S) of Beppe Grillo. With 25.5 per cent of the vote in the lower house and 23.8 per cent in the upper it is the biggest single party in the parliament, as Berlusconi and Bersani both head coalitions. This clearly marks a huge shift in Italian politics. But a shift in which direction?

Beppe Grillo, 64, is the son of the owner of a small welding company from Genoa, who dropped out of university to become a comedian. He was a popular TV performer in the 1980s until he fell foul of the political establishment after he made a joke about the well-known corruption of Bettino Craxi's Socialist party. He was effectively banished from the airwaves. However, his live stand-up shows continued to attract large crowds. In them he regularly targeted the political corruption of Italian politicians.

In 2007, he decided to begin active political campaigning but not in the traditional way. Via the web, he launched what turned into huge mobilisations. On 8 September, he organized a "V-Day Celebration" where the "V" stood for vaffanculo ("go fuck yourself!").

A second V-Day followed on 25 April 2008, in Turin, whose target was the lucrative subsidies the press receives from the government and big business. These issues seemed to put him on the left, as has his enthusiastic endorsement by the famous left wing dramatist Dario Fo.

In 2010, he launched the "Movimento 5 stelle" ("Five Stars Movement" or M5S). The "Five Stars" referred to five issues: "public water, sustainable mobility, development, connectivity, and environmentalism". The new movement, which could be joined via the internet, heavily stressed "clean values" such as honesty in public service, and "direct democracy", demanding that all the existing professional politicians be driven out of public life. This remains a central axis of Grillo's uncompromising position that those elected should be limited to a maximum of two terms, allowed no other jobs, be paid the average wage and barred from standing for office if they have criminal records. Grillo himself did not stand in 2013 because he has a 1980 conviction for manslaughter (in a driving accident).

Grillo has used the new technology and social media, Facebook and Twitter, to communicate directly with his



followers. His enormously popular blog is available in English and Japanese, as well as Italian. By these means he has been able to circumvent the near boycott of the state broadcaster RAI and Berlusconi's print and broadcast media. His followers have created 532 Grillo meet-up groups which form the nucleus of the movement and had 87,895 members in 446 cities by November 2012.

During the general election campaign, he toured the length and breadth of Italy in a camper van, attracting hundreds of thousands to over 70 rallies. His main demands were that there should be a major reform of the electoral law, a referendum on remaining in the Eurozone, cuts in politicians' privileges, a minimum income for the unemployed, 20-hour work week, laws to enforce clean energy and free access for all to the internet.

None of the M5S candidates are professional politicians or have any experience in parliament or government. One of them, Sebastiano Barbanti, a 36-year-old marketing strategist elected in the impoverished southern region of Calabria, told Reuters: "The ideologies are finished, ideas aren't right-wing or left-wing, they are good or bad." So what can be said of Grillo's political stance? Is he right or left, anti- or pro-capitalist?

A millionaire of the people?

For all his deliberately "ordinary man" image Grillo is himself a millionaire, with an official income of €4.5 million, though of course this is small beer compared to the likes of Berlusconi. And there is some serious money from the new technology industries. M5S cofounder, Roberto Casaleggio, is a successful information technology executive, former head of the Italian operations of the British firm Logica who now heads his own

company, Casaleggio Associati.

Casaleggio claims he is for a "new, direct democracy that will see the elimination of all barriers between the citizen and the state". But when challenged by some members who were discontented with how the Movement's policies were decided, Casaleggio responded: "The statute contains the rules. If they want to change the rules, they can create another movement!" "And who wrote the statute?" asked the interviewer. "Grillo and I," he replied. (Guardian, 3 January 2013)

This direct democracy is not even that of the town squares and the Occupy Movement's assemblies. If the demos – the people – cannot impose its will on its millionaire benefactors, then it is no democracy direct or otherwise – a worse situation than in parliamentary democracy.

What is clear is that Grillo and Casaleggio's movement is not working class but neither does it represent a significant sector of big capital, not yet anyway. It is what Marxists characterise as a petit bourgeois populist movement, but one with a pro-capitalist, not an anticapitalist, programme. Of course at present few capitalist want his demagogic, radical proposals.

Flirting with fascism?

Grillo has taken up various left wing and even "anti imperialist" causes, such as opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan. But he has also taken up very right wing ones too, attacking Roma immigrants and saying children born to immigrants should not receive Italian citizenship. He has moreover refused to define himself as "antifascist" and said that he has no objection to members of Casa Pound, a neo-Nazi "social movement" that violently attacks left-wingers, joining his movement.

He has even participated in friendly discussions with Casa Pound on television. One of his "economic advisers" is a financial operator, Eugenio Benettazzo, who sometimes attends meetings of the neo-fascist party Forza Nuova and whose controversial articles are often published on Grillo's website, including one arguing that the financial crisis occurred in the USA because of "racial promiscuity".

At a rally in Brindisi during the elections, Grillo said: "I want a state with balls, let us get rid of the unions, an old structure like the parties. There's no longer a need for trade unions. Companies should belong to those who work." He later clarified his position by saying he meant only the three largest federations, not rank and file unions such as COBAS and CUB.

This echoes the demagoguery used by fascists, who stir up popular anger with radical demands and direct it against the working class movement. It draws on the widespread feeling that Italy's trade unions have failed to defend their members or fight austerity, but rather than calling for more effective unions, controlled by their rank and file members, it demands that a strong (capitalist) state should abolish them as "no longer necessary".

The outcome of the Italian election will undoubtedly deepen the crisis of Italian society, and a crisis always accelerates the polarisation of society. But without a fighting mass movement against austerity, millions see no clear-cut choice or way forward, particularly the poorer sections of the middle class, who hate the one per cent at the top and its paid politicians, but do not identify with the working class because the unions have not used their power to fend off austerity. This inaction has allowed Grillo's M5S to grow, and add further confusion. If this situation continues, crisis and austerity without a revolt, the danger is it could ultimately favour the fascists, as in Greece.

Austerity's real purpose, in Italy and elsewhere, is to make the working class, the lower middle classes and the poor pay for the crisis in order to restore capitalism's profitability, giving it a new lease on life. The Italian working class has to show to the rest of the poor and "little people" that it will impose its own solutions on the crisis – and for that it needs the rebuild a mass party but this time built on a clear programme for the overthrow of the capitalist system, certainly not a mass populist movement controlled from the top down by two millionaires.

io Berlusconi, who scored 30 per cent

together with its fear that posing the question of working class power will open the road to fascism, the truly magnificent struggles of Italian workers and youth will repeatedly come to nothing.

The libertarian and syndicalist trends on the Italian left, with their anti-political prejudices, also have to take a share of the blame. They have played a remarkable role in several waves of social movements and militant strikes, setting up networks of social centres and social forums, but their failure to build, indeed their aversion to building, a fighting party that could challenge for power not primarily via elections but in the workplaces and on the streets, eventually led to the decline of these institutions.

Here, too, their "counter-hegemonic" strategy of countervailing the state power "from below" and building an alternative anti-capitalist culture, only led time and again to avoiding any head-on confrontation with the right wing and centre left governments.

With public debts of 127 per cent of GDP and rising, second only to Greece, Italy is at a crossroads. Deep austerity is the only way out of a crisis for capitalism, on the back of an historic defeat for the Italian working class and terrible poverty. The only way out of this impasse for Italian workers, youth and poor is to force the Italian capitalists and Eurozone banks and multinationals to pay for the crisis is through revolution, lead by a new working class party clearly pledged to a revolutionary strategy which breaks decisively with these traditions of defeat and impotence.

Murder of leftist lawyer Chokri Belaïd could trigger a second revolution

Ilona Szemethy

IN EARLY February, Tunisia was shaken by the brutal assassination of Chokri Belaïd, general secretary of the Democratic Patriots' Movement, which identifies its politics as Marxist and pan-Arabist, and heads a popular front alliance.

Belaïd, a lawyer from a working class background who still lived in a working class area, had defended workers in the Gafsa mining basin under the dictatorship of Ben Ali and was an unsparing critic of the three-party coalition government commonly known as the Troika.

This is headed by the Islamist Ennahda party, which gained about 40 per cent of the vote in the 2011 elections, and initially included the social democratic Ettakatol party and the bourgeois liberal Congress for the Republic (CPR), before the CPR's withdrawal from the coalition.

Islamist extremists had repeatedly threatened Belaïd's life, and Salafist clerics had pronounced fatwas (religious judgments) declaring him no longer a Muslim and calling for his assassination. He was gunned down on 6 February as he left his house to go to work.

As news of the political murder spread, angry crowds gathered in front of the Interior Ministry. Massive demonstrations marched through many towns and in several the offices of the Ennahda party were ransacked. In the capital Tunis, its headquarters were set on fire.

General strike

On 8 February, the day of Belaïd's funeral, the opposition parties and the biggest trade union, the UGT, called a general strike. Some 1.4 million people took to the streets, out of a total population of only 11 million. For the trade union leaders this was to be "a peaceful strike against violence".

However in Tunis, the army intervened, supposedly because of fear of rioting.

Demonstrators chanted, "the people want a new revolution", making it clear that they would continue Belaïd's struggle.

Naturally, the Ennahda party has distanced itself from any responsibility for the assassination. Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali first forced his own government to resign and then tried to establish a



Doing the Harlem Shake against the regime

"government of experts". But he too was then forced to resign after failing to get his own party to agree to the new government.

In answer to the protests, Ennahda organised a counter-demonstration, but the result was pitiful: no more than 15,000 turned out. What was supposed to be a display of mass power actually demonstrated how much support the Ennahda party has lost in recent months.

Reactionary forces

The background to Belaïd's assassination was increasing attacks on meetings and local branches of the secular opposition, on the trade unions, and women's organisations and other social groups. These have been blamed mainly on the so-called League for the Protection of the Revolution, an ironic name for the militias that attack the progressive and oppositional forces that actually made the revolution.

In fact, they are the spearhead of a creeping counterrevolution being carried through by the supposedly moderate Ennahda, which repeatedly compares itself to the Turkish Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP).

There have also been terrorist actions by Tunisian Salafist groups, who have attacked artists, journalists, theatres and art exhibitions, as well as burning synagogues and mausoleums of venerated Muslim saints. They have also attacked various American institutions including the US Embassy.

In an action that badly misfired, they denounced as un-Islamic the "Harlem Shake", the video clip dance "meme" that was performed

in many Tunisian high schools in February.

The fact that the Interior Minister threatened students with expulsion and their teachers with dismissal only politicised it and spread it as a protest against forced cultural "illumination" and repression of the free self-expression of youth.

The Constituent Assembly, elected in October 2011 in the first free elections since Ben Ali, was charged with formulating a constitution within one year and organising parliamentary elections. Neither task has been fulfilled. It is noteworthy that young people organised a "Harlem Shake" outside the Assembly, carrying signs that read: "Where is our constitution?"

Deepening political crisis

In fact, the Constituent Assembly is also in deep crisis. Many elected members have stood down, and the opposition has announced a temporary suspension of cooperation.

The suspicions of Tunisia's youth and trade unionists against the government and the Constituent Assembly are well grounded. Although the governing party has warned of the country falling into "the trap of criminality" and of chaos and unrest throughout the country, what they really fear is another 2011: a wave of angry protests by the mass of the population could force them out of power.

But these scare tactics have not fooled most Tunisian people. On their banners they write "Clear out!", just as they did two years ago when they overthrew the dictator Ben Ali; only now the demand is aimed at Ennahda.

Its leader, Rashid al-Ghan-

nushi, has responded to the comparison of the current situation with the revolution of 2011 by arguing that Belaïd was no Mohamed Bouazizi, and he himself no Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. He should not be so sure of himself!

The country that unleashed the Arab Spring is now seeing a renewed protest movement. The people of Tunisia had hoped for a better life after the revolution, but in reality their economic and political situation has hardly changed. There is still massive unemployment, the police are as harsh as ever, food prices have risen alongside a more general inflation and the government replies to protests with more repression, with many demonstrations banned or forcibly suppressed.

The old corrupt agents of US and European imperialism might have been thrown out by the revolutions across the Arab world, but new reactionary puppets of capital replaced them. None of the governing parties will actually resolve any of the burning problems of the poverty-stricken people.

On the contrary, Ennahda in particular has pursued a radically neoliberal economic policy. Unlike other reactionary religious parties, they have not presented themselves as anti-imperialist but have tried openly to sell off the Tunisian economy to foreign investors, the better to strengthen their own position.

The Tunisian working class and youth, however, have not forgotten the lessons of their past struggles: in the last year there have been numerous strikes, rebellions and demonstrations across the whole of Tunisia in defence of their right

The struggle continues

One of the biggest protests, largely ignored by the Western media, was a five-day all-out strike by the highly exploited workers in the farming town of Siliana in December 2012 and January 2013, demanding a living wage and employment contracts.

This strike, too, was brutally suppressed. The trade union that led the protests eventually came to an agreement with the government and stood down any further protests, thereby betraying a justified rising of militant workers.

That, however, did not mean the end of protests. The economic situation continued to worsen and the Tunisian working class has shown that it has both the courage and the will to continue fighting for a free and worthwhile life.

The revolution of 2011 brought the Tunisians and other Arab peoples a formal freedom, but that is now threatened by the reactionary Islamists as well as by neoliberal forces.

A second revolution is indeed necessary; working people and the youth must turn against the whole system of global capitalism and imperialist exploitation. And this must include its Tunisian representatives, the present regime.

The Tunisian revolution, like others across the region, has huge unfinished democratic tasks: disbanding the brutal police forces inherited from the old regime and replacing them with a popular militia of workers and youth and smashing the Islamist gangs; expropriating the wealthy parasites who grew fat out of the corruption of the old regime and handing over their lands and property to the poor; arresting not only those accused of directly murdering Belaïd but all those who incited his murder; and releas-

ing all remaining political prisoners and putting their persecutors and torturers in jail after sentencing by courts of popular justice.

Tunisians should not forget the famous saying of the French Jacobin revolutionary, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, that "a revolution which stops halfway digs its own grave."

Completing the revolution

To really complete the Tunisian revolution it is necessary for the working class and the unions to launch an all out general strike to force out the government, dissolve the do-nothing Constituent Assembly and elect a new one democratically, under the protection of the workers and revolutionary youth. Its members should be delegates, recallable by their electors.

A revolutionary provisional government should make its priority addressing the material needs of the people, with programmes of public works on urgent socially necessary projects, funded by taxing or expropriating the rich as well as European and US big business interests.

The Tunisian revolution, which began in January 2011 as a democratic revolution, must be completed by uprooting all the repressive machinery of the dictatorship and by enacting all the democratic demands of workers and youth.

But, to meet the burning needs of the people for jobs, food, land, health and education services and women's rights, a social revolution against capital is necessary.

Only such a revolution, one that overthrows the capitalist class, foreign and native, and builds a new state based on workers' councils, can solve the problems of the workers, the unemployed youth and the poverty stricken population of the town and countryside.



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New Anticapitalist Party's congress fails to solve its political crisis

The New Anticapitalist Party seemed a beacon of hope to the left in France and Europe when it was launched in 2009. Marc Lasalle looks at why the dream has faded and what needs to be done to fight government attacks on the working class

OLIVIER BESANCENOT was in 2002 and again in 2007 the charismatic young presidential candidate of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), when he received 1.3 million and 1.2 million votes (4.25 per cent) respectively. He was widely recognised as an expression of the militancy of the struggles of workers and youth against Nicolas Sarkozy's neoliberal reforms.

So when Besancenot announced the project of launching a new party on a broad anticapitalist basis, the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), there was a rapid influx of members, many young and new to politics, bringing its membership to just above 9,000.

Yet delegates to this year's NPA congress had to face the fact that its official membership has now fallen to 2,500. This is roughly the size of the old LCR, the organisation that launched the NPA and which had formally dissolved itself on its foundation.

The congress report attempts an official optimism, claiming that it represented "a new and decisive stage in the work of refounding and reconstructing our party." But hardly anyone believes such head-in-the-sand stuff. The official balance sheet likewise tries to make objective factors the cause for the decline, in particular, the defeat of the 2010 movement against pension reforms.

In fact it is an expression of a severe internal crisis. It exposes the linked phenomena of the NPA's blocked programmatic development and its organisational structure of permanent warring public factions, which will not observe any discipline, even on the electoral terrain.

Tactical shift to the left but pull from the right

Some on the left claim that the NPA's foundation marked an abandonment of Trotskyism. This is not true. It inherited all these problems from the LCR, which had long before abandoned Trotskyism as the basis for building a revolutionary party, for a mélange of Guevarism, libertarianism, Gramscianism and whatever else. Indeed the NPA's foundation was something of left turn for the LCR.

Before this the LCR had long held the perspective of building a party intermediate between what it regarded as revolutionary politics and the left reformism of the French Communist Party (PCF) and the left wing of the Socialist Party (PS). Prior to launching the NPA, it had been seeking organisational unity with these forces.

The NPA's formation was thus a tactical shift to the left, but not a strategic one. Nevertheless, a power-



ful right wing in the old LCR, led by Christian Piquet, resisted it, eager for organic unity with the PCF and the left-PS firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

The system of permanent public factions, reproduced inside the NPA from the LCR's own structures, allowed Piquet's faction to continue to resist and even try to sabotage the NPA project. Meanwhile, the LCR majority, who became the dominant force in the NPA's leadership, had little idea of where it was going.

Its most positive step was to launch a party-wide debate on the party's programme. But it quickly abandoned this, reverting to the old LCR's traditional tactical oscillations: between tail-ending the regular and spontaneous movements of French workers and youth, and standing in election campaigns on a standard left reformist platform.

In the latter case, it was to run into the question posed by Piquet's wing: why would it not unite in election campaigns with the PCF and Mélenchon's Left Party (Parti de Gauche or PdG), who between them had formed a Left Front (Front de Gauche or FdG)?

In its first years, the NPA attracted whole new layers of activists from a wide variety of backgrounds: militant trade unionists, youth, greens, feminists, and even anarchists. Militants from smaller Trotskyist groups joined it, too. However, it failed to win them to a clear common strategic orientation for fighting capitalism; that is, to a coherent programme. Nor did it gain any agreement on the tactics necessary to bring down the Sarkozy government. And as we have noted,

its electoral tactics were incoherent.

In the autumn of 2010, during a wave of strikes and youth mobilisations against pension reforms, NPA militants plunged into the fray, and correctly advocated a general strike. However, when the union leaders backed down in the face of Sarkozy's legal threats, the NPA did not come forward as a centre of resistance to the sell out, or even unequivocally denounce it. They simply "moved on" to the next set of elections.

But by now, Mélenchon's political star was rising, and NPA members began to leave the party when they realised that, far from making a major electoral breakthrough, it was actually being squeezed by the dynamic Mélenchon. If electoral success is what you are after, and if you believe a left reformist platform is good enough, then why not go for the real thing rather than a "revolutionary" imitation?

The old LCR rightists, who had opposed the NPA's foundation, kept up a public barrage of criticism inside it. In particular, they attacked the NPA majority's insistence on a complete break with the PS as a precondition for any electoral bloc with the FdG. They recognised that this is, in effect, an impossible demand, because the PCF in particular depends on electoral deals with the PS to defend its seats in regional and local councils (and the generous state funding that comes with them).

When the NPA chose car worker militant Philippe Poutou as its 2012 Presidential candidate, the sections of the ex-LCR right announced they would not campaign for him, while some announced that they would sup-

port Mélenchon. The party did nothing to discipline them, and Poutou's campaign was constantly raked by withering fire from the NPA right accusing him of sectarianism. No wonder he gained only 1.15 per cent of the vote, as against Mélenchon's 11.1 per cent.

Last year, the rightist tendency in the NPA, the Gauche anticapitaliste (Anticapitalist Left or GA), having achieved 23 per cent of the delegates at an NPA conference in July, finally decided to quit the party. They left with around 300 members to join with the former LCR rightists around Christian Piquet inside the FdG.

The trouble with pluralism

Those in Britain who regard "pluralism", "heterogeneity" and permanent public factions as the royal road to success, and who regard the NPA as the model for this, should ponder on these experiences. Unfortunately, many of them will probably draw the conclusion: "In for a penny, in for a pound". Maybe the NPA was just too independent, and not quite pluralistic enough? Maybe it should have liquidated itself into the FdG? At the very least, they might think, it should have supported Mélenchon. How this would have prevented current or potential NPA militants from gravitating to the FdG is a mystery.

There are in fact two left tendencies or platforms within the NPA. The largest by far is Platform Y (previously Platform 2 or P2), which gained 31 per cent of the delegates at the second congress, and which Philippe Poutou is a member of. Its politics are very much those of the former members of the Lutte Ouvrière (LO)

group who joined the NPA on its foundation. After the GA decamped, and with mounting differences inside the NPA leadership majority – some wanted to eat humble pie and seek a rapprochement with Mélenchon, and others wanted to tough it out – it seemed that Platform Y could win the NPA's leadership.

Two factors prevented this. The sheer loss of members, about half in a few years, was one. The other factor was the mounting differences within Platform Y. It was from the start a heterogeneous bloc, the two largest elements in it being the leadership of the LCR's former youth organisation, the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR), and LO's former Etincelle (Spark) faction, which originally emerged as a faction inside LO in the 1990s.

While Platform Y correctly criticised the leadership's obsession with elections, they failed to create a platform with a clear strategy for the party. Their approach to programme is similar to that of LO: economic and prone towards tailing trade union struggles.

The furthest left of the NPA's factions is Platform Z. Composed of the Fraction Trotskiste – Courant Communiste Révolutionnaire (FT-CCR) and the Tendence Claire, Platform Z more than doubled its vote to 9 per cent of the delegates, a real achievement.

The weakness of their politics is that they have no united front policy towards the PS, and therefore no way of breaking French workers from reformism. And their approach to the NPA's development is negative. Regarding its foundation as an abandonment of "Trotskyism", they cannot see how to struggle for a revolutionary programme within it.

While most of the NPA platforms agree on a turn outwards towards workers' struggles, these are developing under a reformist PS-led government, where the union leaders, as usual, are holding back and sabotaging struggles to protect the government. Nevertheless, PS President François Hollande is tearing up his promises of a "change" from austerity towards an expansionary economic policy, and workers' anger is beginning to rise in response.

Thus the task of creating a class-wide militant movement against austerity involves having to apply the united front tactic towards all varieties of reformist workers willing to engage in a common struggle. If the NPA can be won to doing this, if it can overcome its factionalism, and if it is willing to debate a strategic revolutionary programme, then it can recover some of its lost ground. If not, then it faces a bleak future.

THE CRISIS IN THE SWP will not be resolved by the Special Conference called for 10 March 2013. The conference, called unconstitutionally at four weeks' notice, has the sole aim of putting an end to the factional struggle, which has polarised the membership for and against the Central Committee.

The crisis erupted when the CC expelled four comrades a month before the party's annual conference in January, then managed to scrape through conference a vote to acquit a senior party full-timer and former CC member of serious charges of rape and sexual harassment. Since then, hundreds of members have scornfully disregarded norms of discipline, factions have been formed and long-standing activists have left.

This will be the decisive test to whether the CC can "draw a line" under the affair in the only way they know how – by co-opting the moderate wing of the opposition and forcing out those who refuse to submit to this sham of a "democratic process".

There can be no doubt that while the leadership may be willing to compromise with the "respectable" leaders of the In Defence Of Our Party faction – themselves former CC loyalists – the CC and its supporters are incapable of submitting themselves to an urgent reform of the SWP's democratic and political composition.

Certainly the CC has no intention of permitting questions of policy or perspective to be raised – the conference intends to deal solely with the opposition to the Dispute Committee handling of the rape accusation.

The shameless trampling of the SWP's formal democracy shows that this is the case. Just one Pre-Conference Bulletin was published – not the three guaranteed by the constitution. Worse, the Bulletin was circulated only after most aggregates to elect conference delegates had taken place. In case this wasn't enough to stifle debate, the "rules for aggregates" effectively silenced opposition, with the intended result: faction members elected as delegates are outnumbered by loyalists out of all proportion to the actual balance of forces.

These rules gave the oppositionists just six minutes to explain and motivate their opposition to the regime. The CC also demanded name of the faction speaker was in advance. The speaker for the CC had no time constraints – and observed none, speaking at length at most aggregates. There was no right to sum up.

This is a disregard for the rights of members, which is unprecedented even by the bureaucratic norms of the SWP. It is also a foretaste of things to come, if the loyalists succeed in defeating attempts to build an organisation, which holds its politics and leaders accountable to its members.

In the words of the US command in Vietnam, the leadership of the SWP intends to "burn the village in order to save it". The conference will give the CC the authority to launch a witch-hunt aimed at purging the organisation of all dissent. The conference is unconstitutional and its decisions should be rejected as illegitimate.

No doubt many members will leave through disgust or intimidation, but those who remain have a responsibility



Alex Callinicos lectures the opposition on democratic centralism

After the conference the struggle must continue

The SWP special conference has opened the way for a counter-offensive by the Central Committee against those calling for democratic accountability, writes **KD Tait**. Now the faction needs to step up its struggle for root and branch reform if the SWP is to rise to the tasks it sets itself

ity to maintain the struggle. Members should fight for the right to maintain a faction with full rights and the convening of a new conference with a democratic three-month discussion period.

The role of the student SWSS groups fighting for political autonomy and the International Socialism blog will be crucial factors in maintaining the organisational integrity and forum for political debate which will be the oxygen of the opposition. The aim should be to create the pole of attraction for a strategic response, which alone can stop the SWP's slide into a besieged sect or total disintegration.

To create the basis of a genuinely democratic centralist culture, the following organisational forms and democratic rights need to be established and used to undertake a profound discussion of principles and programme. In this way the foundation of a genuine revolutionary party can be laid in Britain and internationally.

1. Membership criteria

The three Bolshevik conditions – agreement to fight for the programme, paying regular subs, personal participation in a party organisation – are the essential foundations for effective common participation in the class struggle by an informed and regularly active membership which can select and de select its own leadership. The membership must be being constantly trained as leaders for the wider mass struggles of the working class, the oppressed, youth, etc.

2. Branches and districts

By and large, the branch (whether geographical or workplace) should be the normal base unit and should elect its own leadership and, via aggregate meetings, a district leader-

ship. In matters relating to its own sphere of competence it should have a wide degree of autonomy though it is bound by policy decisions of the conference, NC and CC. District full-timers (where they are necessary) should be controlled/directed by the areas in which they work but in general the leadership at these levels should not consist of full-timers but elected committee members.

3. Internal bulletins

IBs should be issued monthly throughout the year and fortnightly for a three-month pre-conference period. Though the CC should be responsible for editing them it should not normally reject contributions and if it does it should state in the bulletin that it has done so, giving (a) whose contribution and (b) the reason. Members should have an automatic right of appeal to the next NC.

4. Tendencies and factions

The right to form tendencies and factions shall be restored with no time limit. Only a conference should have the right to order the dissolution of either and then this should be an unusual occurrence. Factions must be accorded representation on the NC in proportion to the votes their principle documents or resolution receives at conference. The same must be true at district aggregates in the election of district committees.

5. Control Commission not Disputes Committee

The Disputes Committee should be abolished since it covers up the responsibility of the leading bodies for discipline. Disciplinary measures are the responsibility of the sovereign body and the leading committees it elects but they must then be able to

be appealed against to the superior body to the one enacting the measures up to the conference itself. The CC should have the power only to suspend a member. Expulsions should be the sole prerogative of the NC or the conference itself.

6. Special investigations

The CC or NC might appoint an investigative body to assist it but (a) it should be selected in a way appropriate to the specific case and (b) it should make a recommendation but not a judgement. The latter must be the responsibility of the leading bodies. Major penalties – suspension or expulsion – shall by default have the right to be appealed against to either a control commission elected by conference, or to conference itself. The control commission (the name refers to the fact that it controls or checks the actions of the executive to ensure they are not violations of the members' rights nor motivated by political convenience) should have the power to suspend any disciplinary action until the next conference.

7. Right to caucus

Members of oppressed groups above all women and the racially oppressed, but also LGBT people, youth (under 18), the disabled etc. shall have the right to caucus, i.e. call meetings of all members belonging to the appropriate category to discuss examples of oppressive or discriminatory behaviour or just to encourage greater participation by its members. It must have the right of confidentiality for its discussion though it must make a report of any requests to the appropriate bodies.

8. Programme and principles

The CC accuses the opposition of feminism and autonomism but with-

out either pointing to formulation in the opposition's positions, which might prove this and without being able to point to a document or documents, which had been voted for by a national or international conference after a democratic discussion process. In short the SWP does not have a programme, which its members can measure this or that policy against. The result is disasters like the Respect debacle, or the malformed "united fronts of a special type" (UAF, RtW, UtR, EAN, etc.) that break all the fundamental principles of the united front laid down by the revolutionary Communist International.

9. A process of programmatic discussion

The SWP needs to open up a year-long discussion of programme – involving commissions of activists from the various areas of struggle, leading to NCs and maybe an interim conference to come up with a draft that can be put to the entire membership. This process will be enormously educational. It is not an alternative to an outward struggle orientation, since what is being discussed are policies for this struggle and the membership's practical experience in these struggles.

10. Revolutionary unity and internationalism

Nor should such a process take place just internally. It could be part of an initiative by the SWP for left unity – for creating a real party of the militant vanguard. It could be a process, which leads to thousands of new members – and other groups too – joining the party. Last but not least it most certainly should include all the sections of the International Socialist Tendency.

Hugo Chávez Frías, 1954-2013

Dave Stockton

HUGO RAFAEL CHÁVEZ Frías, President of Venezuela, finally succumbed to cancer at 4.25 local time on 5 March 2013.

There is an old Latin maxim, "Speak nothing but good of the dead." Revolutionary Marxists scorn such piety. In the case of Hugo Chávez, we will leave that to professional flatterers of power, providing it is "anti-imperialist", such as George Galloway. We prefer Trotsky's dictum, "Always say what is" and will not change our tune on Chávez just because he has died.

Of course, the news will mean faces wreathed with smiles and smug satisfaction in the White House and Congress. From the first moment of his election, in 1999, Chávez was a sharp thorn in the side of the rulers of the USA as well as the wealthy business and landed elites across Latin America.

The repeated condemnations of Chávez by these gentlemen and ladies because he was a "dictator" should provoke laughter, coming as it does from people who for decades helped to install and support the likes of Augusto Pinochet and Hosni Mubarak. The truth is that Chávez received repeated electoral endorsements from an outright majority of Venezuelans.

Reforms

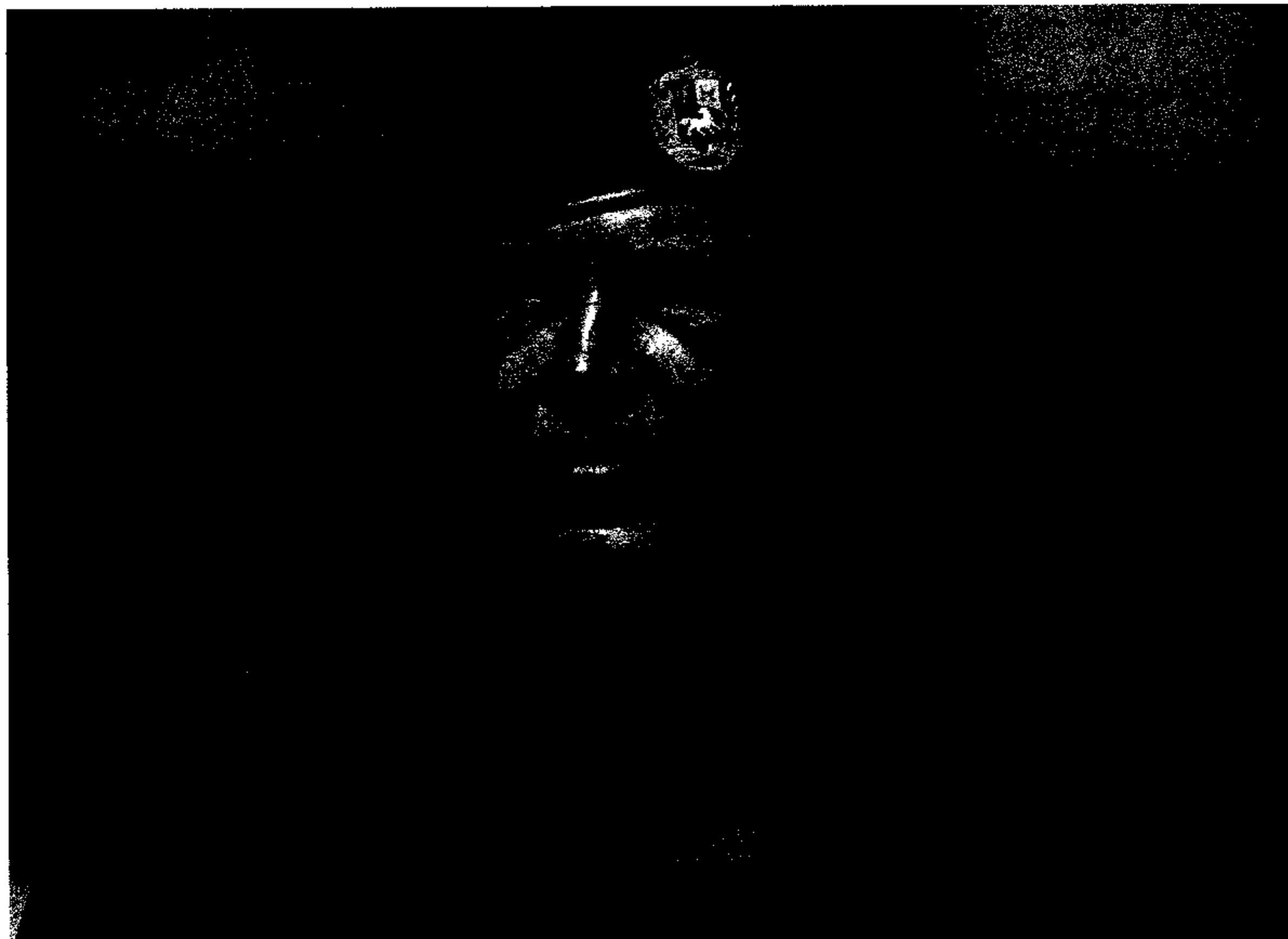
The reason is clear enough; his "Bolivarian Revolution" brought significant social reforms for the poor: a rarity indeed in our era, when "reform" has come to mean the exact opposite, the destruction of social welfare and public ownership in the interest of a tiny elite of bankers and billionaires.

For the huge numbers of poor, in a country rich in natural resources, whose elite never saw fit to share the country's income with them, Chávez' takeover of the oil wealth and his creation of "misiones", which aimed at giving ordinary people quality healthcare, education, jobs, and access to culture, was the secret of his mass support.

These reforms did, indeed, bring real improvements in living standards for millions – although we should not forget that a more than tenfold increase in oil prices for a large part of his presidency allowed their introduction without having to seize the wealth of the capitalist class as such.

Throughout Latin America, his stance of defiance to the USA roused an enthusiastic response and encouraged other governments – like those of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and the Kirchners in Argentina – to take up a more independent stance vis-a-vis the USA. In this, they were materially encouraged by oil-rich Venezuela, as well as by the meteoric rise of China as a customer and investor.

The days of total US domination of Latin America are over and, for



years to come, Chávez will be associated with the heightened self-respect this has brought to the peoples of the continent.

Socialism or populism?

But was Hugo Chávez a socialist? If by that it is meant, "Did he carry out social reforms? Did he make the rich squeal when he forced them to give up a bit of space at the pigs' trough of the national wealth?" then, yes he was.

In an era when Social Democracy and Labour in Europe were represented by the likes of Gerhard Schröder and Tony Blair, and Communism in China by Hu Jintao, looking for anyone in government who actually believed s/he was a socialist was like looking for a needle in a haystack. For this reason, many ordinary people, youth and working class militants, were excited by Chávez' talk of 21st Century Socialism.

But all that glitters is not gold! While Chávez talked much of socialism and revolution, what he decidedly did not mean was a revolution made by the working class itself against big capital both Venezuelan and foreign (whether that means North American, European or Chinese). His socialism was redistributionist alright, but it stopped well short of the ownership of the means of production.

Likewise, though he created a lightly armed popular militia in the aftermath of coup threats, his regime still rested on the monopoly of force remaining in the hands of the army and the police force. When workers took "unauthorised" action, that is, strikes and occupations, he was perfectly willing to use state forces to restore law and order and safeguard ownership.

In short, for all of his talk, his praise of Marx and Lenin, of Gue-

vara, even of Trotsky, for all of the popular committees and militias, and his claim that a socialist revolution was ongoing, Venezuela remains a capitalist country and the means of production remain in the hands of an exploiting bourgeois class and a capitalist state.

So what is Chavismo? It is a 21st century version of Latin American left populism, an ideology and programme that seeks to improve the life of the poor without digging up the roots of capitalism: private ownership of all the large scale means of production and distribution.

In the 1930s, Trotsky called similar regimes "left bonapartism", or "bonapartism of a special type". Normally, bonapartism, that is, a regime that rests to an important degree on the military but claims to be above the classes and ruling for the whole people, is a right wing phenomenon, crushing the workers' organisations and struggles.

But, occasionally, it can take a nationalist, anti-imperialist, left form. This still means relying on the army but, rather than the high command

drawn from the old elite, it means promoting the nationalistic colonels and junior officers. Above all, it means mobilising the masses – the workers, the peasants and the urban poor – to defend the regime against the local elite and their imperialist backers. Usually, as with Chávez himself, such regimes are headed by a charismatic caudillo – leader – from humble origins; Chávez's parents were poor rural schoolteachers.

Coup and counter-coup

Of course, imperialism and its agents in the local elite hate and detest such upstart figures, regarding them as "vulgar" and "disrespectful".

Hence, there were several plots and assassination attempts, the biggest being the coup of 2002, which was immediately welcomed in Washington but confronted in Caracas. The overturn was only reversed by an incredible mass mobilisation and a mutiny by the junior officers and the lower ranks of the army.

This genuine revolutionary response of the masses fractured and weakened the old state power and

opened the way for Chávez' Constituent Assembly and a new constitution that allowed major reforms. Because this broke the power of the old parliamentary cliques and the judiciary, both drawn from the elite, they and their US backers declared it a dictatorship.

Unfortunately, the prestige of Chávez and the absence of a powerful, independent workers' party with a really anti-capitalist programme meant that the revolution did not move on to pull up the roots of capitalism.

The weakness of the Venezuelan revolution was its reliance on Chávez and the reformist straightjacket he imposed on it. Likewise, the socialist party he created, the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, remained under bureaucratic control and all expressions of working class independence were repressed.

Internationalism is the litmus test of a truly revolutionary and socialist programme. Hugo Chávez laid claim to an international socialist policy, at one time even calling for the formation of a Fifth International and claiming adherence to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In reality, however, his internationalism was little more than a realpolitik courting of various "anti-imperialist" regimes, that is, capitalist states in rivalry with the USA, as allies for Venezuela.

So he wholeheartedly supported Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and his repression of the green revolution and Muammar Gaddafi and his bloody attempts to crush the Libyan revolution. One of his last statements was in support of the Syrian butcher Bashar al Assad. "How can I not support the Assad government?" he asked. "It's the legitimate government of Syria. Who should we be supporting, the terrorists?"

Will Chavismo and the Bolivarian revolution survive him? Certainly the parties of the local elite and their backers in the White House will do all they can to take back the power they believe to be rightfully theirs and to reverse the reforms that have "ruined Venezuela". Independent working class forces and revolutionary socialists should fight all such attempts in a united front with the Chavista forces.

But this does not mean they should endorse the rule of Nicolas Maduro and the Bolivarian bureaucracy. It does mean doing all in their power to revive the mass mobilisations against the right and against capitalism and imperialism. Starting from defence of the gains made by the masses under Chávez, the struggle must become a genuine, self-organised, permanent revolution, aiming at working class power, expressed through workers and peasants' councils.

Only such a development can fulfil the genuine and justified hopes and aspirations of the mass following of Hugo Chávez, whilst aiding them to shed their illusions in any great leader, alive or dead.



Mourners carry Chávez' coffin through the streets of Caracas

The NHS needs action not words

Carla Turner

Approaching a year since the Health and Social Care bill passed through Parliament, Carla Turner looks at the damage already done, what's still to come and whether recent protests against local cuts can form the basis for a national campaign to save our NHS

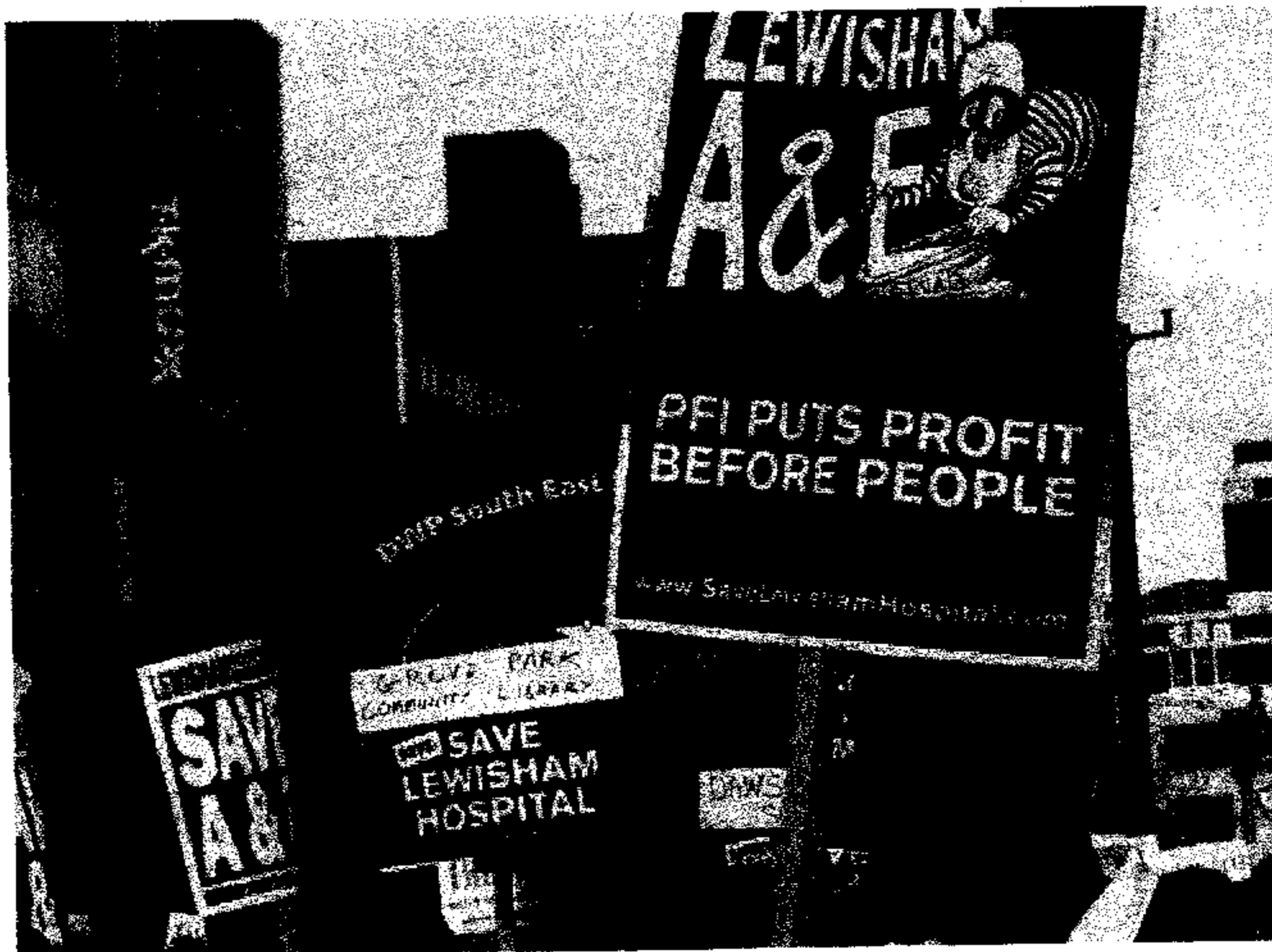
In 1948, the Labour government nationalised health services, laying the basis for a comprehensive system free at the point of use. Now, 65 years later, we are battling to keep what remains of the National Health Service in public hands.

The NHS is being forced to make "savings" of £20 billion. Hospitals are being forced to cut frontline services, to pay through the nose for Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes. For-profit health companies such as Virgin Care have already bought up some local services, while plans are underway to privatise ambulance services.

The attacks come in various forms, from prioritising private over NHS patients to cutting pensions and labour costs in preparation for privatisation, but they all boil down to the same thing – reducing healthcare availability for all who can't afford to go private.

It is private companies like Virgin Care, Serco and Care UK who are bidding for slices of our health service, and the only thing on their minds is the bottom line. Virgin Care now runs 358 General Practices. Since it took over Kings Heath in Northampton, NHS patients have had to wait up to three weeks for an appointment, three GPs have been reduced to one and three nurses down to one part-timer, all so that Richard Branson can add more millions to his bank account.

However GP's surgeries are not the only services being pri-



20,000 people marched against the closure of Lewisham A&E in January

vatised. Perhaps the biggest sell-off is in community health, with local NHS bodies being instructed to put out to tender 39 services, from autism care to wheelchair provision. A lot of community services are for the elderly, who the government and NHS bureaucrats believe are easy targets.

But even our children aren't safe from the Tory millionaires – many of them with direct or indirect personal links to the private health sector. The government has been trying to shut down child heart surgery units in Leeds, Leicester and Royal Brompton. Ministers claim the units are being closed to ensure better treatment at the hospitals still open, but why not invest to improve provision at all hospitals?

Health cuts

Nationally we are also seeing massive cuts to services for under-16s with a third of neonatal units in England reduc-

ing their number of nurses. Bliss charity chief executive, Andy Cole, warned: "The lives of England's sickest babies are at risk by needless cuts to the neonatal nursing workforce." Huge numbers of midwives' jobs are also being cut despite the Royal College of Nursing saying that the NHS desperately needs more.

These cases demonstrate exactly what the Tories think of the NHS. A health service bought and paid for over six decades by working people is being broken up and sold off wholesale with no regard for the consequences.

The Mid-Staffordshire Hospital scandal, where budget cuts were placed above patient's needs, exposed the government's lack of investment and carefree attitude to standards. Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals Trust in Berkshire, for example, is considering closing or reducing services to pay down its £10

million debt. That could see services such as surgery, orthopaedics, scanning and children's services cut or closed.

Many patients are complaining that GPs are refusing to issue them with medication because it is no longer within their budget. Yet if they were in a foundation trust which had made cuts in other places, say by reducing doctors or nurses, then it's possible their drugs would still be available. This is the postcode lottery, which will see the quality of healthcare provision impact on housing costs, driving low-income families into areas with worse coverage.

PFI debts

Trusts face crippling debts under legacy of PFI. Last July Andrew Lansley picked "special administrator" Matthew Kershaw deal with South London Health Trust's unsustainable PFI debts. He recom-

mended that Lewisham should merge with Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Woolwich, despite the fact it has no connection to SLHT. This means the closure of Lewisham's £12 million newly refurbished Accident & Emergency department, cuts to its maternity services and two-thirds of its buildings being sold off. This caused huge outrage. Residents, hospital workers, community groups and MPs have come together to form the Save Lewisham Hospital campaign. Mobilising tens of thousands with petitions and public meetings, the campaign held demonstrations in November and January.

Debates have taken place within the campaign as to whether industrial action should be supported or encouraged. One worker at the hospital said: "Strike action in an A&E is difficult and staff know that, but that's not to say strike action isn't appropriate in other departments."

Further north at hospitals in Mid Yorkshire, medical secretaries and receptionists, so-called "back office staff", have taken strike action against another pay cut. The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which runs hospitals in Wakefield, Dewsbury and Pontefract, has to save £24m by April 2013, and due to this over 70 members were sent redundancy letters and other employees face pay cuts of between £1,700 and £2,500 per annum. They may not be doctors or nurses, but they're still essential to the running of the NHS, sorting out appointments, paperwork and other clerical tasks that can't just be offloaded onto nurses or untrained agency workers.

Thousands of nursing jobs are disappearing as hospital trusts shrink their workforces to cut costs. Some hospital

trusts are shedding as many as 300 nursing jobs over the next few years. Whether through natural wastage or redundancy, the result is reduced patient care. However the politicians try to spin it, the price of closed wards, fewer doctors and less medicine will be measured in reduced quality of care, longer waiting times and neglect, and ultimately in lives.

Opposition

An opposition is beginning to emerge to the cuts. The question now is whether the campaigning groups that have taken the lead in this can join forces with unions that have so far offered only token resistance.

Lewisham and Mid Yorks show what can be done. With 26 A&Es facing the axe at Lewisham, if one goes down the it will give the government the confidence to press on with the others. The closure of each new ward and A&E brings mass privatisation a step closer.

We need a mass national campaign to defend our NHS. It's a service that we all have to use at some point in our lives, but without action now there will soon be nothing but a swamp of cutthroat healthcare companies competing in an overpriced and unregulated market.

A step forward would be to hold a national demonstration against all healthcare cuts. Health workers need to be organising in their unions and forming rank and file networks to ensure that workers decide what kind of action is effective and make it happen if the union bosses won't fight.

The results of the Health and Social Care Bill will be incredibly difficult to reverse otherwise. It needs to be confronted and overturned before it's too late.

Support the Save our NHS national demonstration 18 May