

CLIMATE CHANGE

Government is set ambitious CO₂ target

THE GOVERNMENT recently appointed Ed Miliband as the new Energy and Climate Change Secretary. In a surprising announcement he has accepted the main proposal of the independent Climate Change Committee and chaired by Lord Turner, former Director-General of the CBI.

Adair Turner was presumably chosen in the belief that his credentials as a businessman and academic would give him both credibility and influence. The main proposal from their Report is to increase Britain's target for cutting carbon emissions from 60% to at least 80% by 2050, and to extend it to include other greenhouse gases such as methane and nitrous oxide. Turner will set out how to meet the first 15 years of carbon budgets in December.

Miliband therefore at least accepts that the speed of global warming has increased since the original figure of 60% was set by the Stern Report in 2006. In the context of the current economic crisis he admitted:

"It would not be true to say that after the events of the past few weeks that climate change is at the front of millions of people's minds. But politics is about leadership, and that means saying that this is an incredibly important issue, not just for us but for our children."

He went on to say that much of this leadership must be shown by the EU.

"By the end of the year the EU must reach agreement on the 2020 package of renewables and energy efficiency. That is how we send a signal to get a worldwide UN deal in Copenhagen at the end of next year."

All of this was widely welcomed by environmental campaigners, for example Dr Doug Parr, Chief Scientist for Greenpeace, who said:

"This a hugely encouraging first move from the new climate change secretary. In a decade in power Labour has never adopted a target so ambitious, far-reaching and internationally significant as this."

Likewise, Ruth Davies, head of climate at the RSPB said:

"This is the most far-reaching climate change initiative any government could take and is a testament to the efforts of campaigners."

If the findings of the Report are fully acted upon it would indeed be the most ambitious legally binding commitment of any country in the world. It would also give Britain a strong bargaining position in international negotiations on a new global plan. But we have to question how serious the government really is in trying to achieve these targets. As Miliband himself has said:

If the findings of the Report are fully acted upon it would indeed be the most ambitious legally binding commitment of any country in the world

"We all know that signing up to an 80% target in 2050, when most of us will not be around, is the easy part. The hard part is meeting it and the milestones that will show we are on track."

Top of the list of reasons to be cautious is the fact that they have decided not to include aviation in the renewables target, which Miliband justifies by arguing that "there is not a credible way of showing aviation can be driven by renewables". Andy Atkins, executive director of Friends of the Earth, has quite rightly criticised this:

"Miliband's admission that

pollution from international aviation (and shipping) will be dealt with outside the Climate Change Bill is a sign that these industries are being picked out for special treatment yet again. We cannot leave cuts in aviation and shipping emissions to chance."

This is also contrary to the Turner Report, which includes emissions from aviation and transport in its 80% reduction target, although initially they would not be legally binding. The approval or not of Heathrow's third runway will be one test of the government's real commitment on reducing aviation's contribution to global warming.

Next is the lack of concrete proposals on how to achieve the target. Miliband puts emphasis on making it easier for everybody to be greener in their everyday lives. He supports brother David Milliband's idea of a personal carbon allowance to reduce our individual carbon footprint, but admits that, "as to the long term practicalities and how it would work, I don't know".

So it remains as an idea only at this stage. There are no concrete proposals as to how we are to be

encouraged to make our lives greener, particularly given the economic recession and the difficulties that will create. No comment is made on the Turner Report's longer term goal of zero carbon electricity to power cars and heat homes.

On the controversial plan to build a new coal-fired power station at Kingsnorth in Kent, Miliband remains, publicly at least, undecided: "The only long term prospect for sustainable energy is around clean fuels. If we are going to meet our targets for 2050 we will have to do it with clean energy."

Turner is much clearer, arguing that “we have to totally decarbonise the power sector by 2030, well before 2050.”

So, if the government is serious about achieving this target, this means opposition to all new coal-fired power stations, at least until carbon-capture storage (CCS) technology has been fully developed and tested. Ministers have admitted that CCS may not happen until 2050.

On the equally controversial question of nuclear energy Miliband calls himself a sober-

minded supporter. It looks like government plans to build ten new nuclear plants will still go ahead. In response we must continue to raise the demand for a workers’ enquiry into the safety of existing nuclear stations, and therefore for a moratorium on the construction of any new stations.

Miliband wants to give encouragement to small-scale energy producers, such as homes with wind turbines or solar panels, to sell electricity to the national grid at a guaranteed price. He pledged to amend the Bill to create

so-called feed-in tariffs to allow this, as has happened in Germany, helping to create a massive solar industry.

This may well be an encouragement to those relatively wealthy people who can already afford them. However, there is no promise of the massive government spending needed to provide millions more homes with the means of both producing energy and reducing consumption. The council housing stock for example needs a massive injection of funds and labour to bring it up to modern

CCC TRADE UNION GROUP

Union conference against climate change

ON 7 March 2009 The Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Union Group will be holding its second trade union conference in London.

The day will feature a series of workshops on topics: What is involved in being a workplace environmental representative; What we mean by a “just transition” to a low carbon economy; The economics of climate change; Transport; Renewable energy; Methods of struggle amongst them. In addition there will be three main forums on: What future for coal?; Is nuclear the answer? and The role of aviation. These three topics have been chosen to engage real debates within the trade union movement, with national unions on both sides of the debate.

A wide range of speakers have been invited from the trade union movement and environmental campaigns. There will be a firm emphasis on floor based discussions and workshops, with a similar approach to that of the recent Convention of the Left in Manchester. Top tables will be avoided and invited and floor speakers will get equal time. This is an important opportunity for us to discuss issues such as the building of more coal-fired power

stations, that are currently the focus of debate in the labour movement.

At the last conference over 300 trade unionists attended. Let’s make sure this one is bigger still. If you would like to know more about the conference, get your trade union branch to sponsor the conference and send a delegation, or if you would like to organise a bookstall check out the website at cacctu.wordpress.com, email climatetradeunion@googlemail.com, or write to:

**CCC Trade Union Conference,
PO Box 417, Manchester M45 0AP**

Conference details:
**7th March 2009
Franklin-Wilkins Building,
Kings College, Stamford Street,
London SE1 9NH**

Model resolution

This branch recognises:
That Climate Change is an issue of increasing concern, with the latest scientific evidence showing that the world is warming faster than expected.

The changing climate will lead to more flooding, droughts, famine and hurricanes across the globe affecting the poorest in society first and greatest across the globe.

Climate Change has become a major issue for Trade Unions, many of whom have supported climate events in the last year, including the Campaign Against Climate Change (CaCC) Trade Union conference, where over 300 delegates heard leading Trade Union figures and MPs commit their unions to campaigning over the issue.

This December will see the latest in a series of United Nations discussions about a replacement to the Kyoto Agreement, in Poznan, Poland.

This branch therefore resolves to:
1. Support, publicise and encourage members to attend the second Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Union Conference (CCCTU) in London on Saturday 7th March 2009.

2. Donate £___ to the organisers towards the cost of the conference.
3. Sponsor the CCCTU conference in the name of this Branch.
4. Send our banner to this events.
Please send cheques, payable to “Campaign Against Climate Change” to
CCC TU conference
(see address above)

For more information contact
**Martin 079 585 35 231 or
Roy 0780 1263 265**

conservation standards. Instead the government gives the task of greening the energy sector to – the energy companies! And their answer is to distribute a few energy saving light bulbs for free.

We should broadly welcome the recommendations of the Turner Report. However, as can be seen, it is already clear that the government is likely to oppose, or avoid by sleight of hand, what it sees as the more controversial proposals to achieve the target of reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050.

The crucial issue is how these ambitious targets are to be met, and

who is going to pay the price. The workers' movement needs to demand actions that will help to reduce waste and cut fuel bills, through an emergency plan for massive government investment in domestic energy efficiency, expansion of public transport and subsidies for moving over to small renewable energy generation.

We must build a massive campaign around climate change in the workers' movement – the Campaign against Climate Change trade union conference on 7 March 2009 is one step on that road.

Pete Ashley

In contrast the 2008 NUT campaign seemed to rapidly achieve success, with a national strike on 24 April, when teachers were joined by PCS and college and university staff in the UCU in lively demonstrations around the country. The problem here was that the original ballot had only called for a one day strike. This meant a second ballot was necessary to continue the campaign. Since clearly no one believed the government would cave in after one day of strike action, the question is why did the leadership go for such a limited ballot?

In May and June the debate began over when and how to organise the next ballot. Time slipped by and the summer holidays loomed. The Executive decided that it was not possible to ballot and take action before the end of term. The momentum of course was lost. The next ballot did not happen until the autumn and despite a yes vote the NUT executive later took the first opportunity to call off the action.

Everyone, correctly, wanted the widest possible action involving as many unions as possible. Publicly announced by Gordon Brown, the general attack on pay demanded a collective response, rather than individual unions fighting on their own. However, the union bureaucrats ensured the strike dates never coincided – apart from the action on 24 April. It is quite

PUBLIC SECTOR

Pay campaigns – leaders demobilise the fight

IN NOVEMBER the National Union of Teachers (NUT) called off any action on pay. Following a ballot that had run over the October half term holiday, the Executive of the union decided that the turnout was too low to carry strike action, despite the fact that the majority had voted “yes”.

The following day the civil servants union, the PCS suspended their action on pay. In the same month Unison council workers in Scotland narrowly voted to accept a two-year below inflation pay package with 3% in the first year and 3.5% in the second. This was despite a recommendation from the Scottish leadership to reject the deal. This was the last dying ember of any kind of campaign of action over pay in 2008.

So, why did the public sector pay campaign fall apart?

The campaign in Unison was a disaster from the beginning and was in some senses a repeat of what had happened last year. In 2007 Unison had two ballots over the same pay offer of 2.75% and there was a narrow vote in favour of strike action. This result took place against the backdrop of the

national postal dispute, where there had been several days of industrial action by CWU membership in Royal Mail. Nevertheless UNISON leaders called the dispute off. The 2.75% offer was imposed by the employers and that helped set the stage for an even worse defeat this year.

The 2008 Unison pay campaign in local government started very late in the day. The settlement date

The general attack on pay demanded a collective response by the unions, not individual ones. The union leaderships ensured this did not happen

is 1 April, but the ballot result wasn't declared until after the conference in the second half of June. Members were told time and time again by the leaders “you will have to strike until the cows come home if you are going to extract any significant concessions from the employers,” a stance that demoralised people.

clear that there has been no serious attempt to coordinate a fightback against a government that has taken on the unions one by one. The demand for unity has indeed been used as an excuse for inaction – the “they have called it off, we must too” argument. The national union leaderships have been an absolute disgrace in this struggle.

At the same time, however, what happened during the course of 2008 was not just a question of bureaucratic treachery and betrayal. It also revealed the fundamental weaknesses in terms of stewards' organisation, union density and basic trade union consciousness across the public sector. The employers in the London local authorities are doubtless aware that

In Unison the left is poorly represented in the union leadership at a national level, with fewer than 20 of the 67 seats on the national executive held by "lefts" in the very broadest sense, and the strength of the left varies dramatically between and within regions. The unelected, unaccountable apparatus of the union wields a remarkable degree of power. Against this background

the NUT pay campaign graphically illustrates, there are serious issues around the accountability of those "lefts" who militants work so hard to get elected. Only three Executive members voted to go ahead with the strike action after the last ballot. The other "lefts" voted against following the majority "yes" vote from members.

The problem with the electoral strategy – broad leftism – is that it is counterposed to building the strength of the rank and file, re-building the union at the base, both organisationally and ideologically.

So what could have been done by those on the left – in leaderships and at all levels within the unions – to secure victory in this year's pay campaigns? To begin, especially in the wake of the policies on public sector pay adopted at successive TUC conferences, we should have demanded that the various leaderships agree on co-ordinated claims across the component parts of the sector, insisting on a single date for settlement of all claims, with no union agreeing a deal until all unions had settled, and agreeing dates for an effective days of generalised strike action to escalate the struggle. Each sector would have strengthened the others and boosted the confidence of the members.

Of course, the existence of Pay Review Bodies in the NHS and teaching complicates matters, but there should be a clear demand for the scrapping of these bodies and a return to collective bargaining.

Clearly, we needed more effective links at a local level between militant activists at rank and file level in the various unions committed to democracy and class struggle. But the fact that these links are not yet forged highlights the problems that persist in terms of the political limitations of the left in the unions. We not only need a new fighting leadership for the unions, but the far left, both the Socialist Party and SWP, need to break with the methods of broad leftism and build a fighting and accountable rank and file movement in the unions.

PR trade unionists

The problem with the electoral strategy – broad leftism – is that it is counterposed to building the strength of the rank and file, re-building the union at the base

Unison density is often below 50% of the workforce. And in both local government, the NHS, and to a large degree the civil service, the growth of unorganised workforces, and outsourcing of frequently strategic sections of the workforce, have made it that much harder to mount effective industrial action.

There is a real gap in terms of trade union consciousness between the white collar, public sector unions and blue collar unions. This isn't to let the leaderships off the hook, but there is a big contrast between the results in the firefighters union (FBU) in 2002-3, when they struck over their pay, and the recent Unison and NUT campaigns. The FBU had a turnout of more than 80% and a similarly huge "yes" vote. Last year the CWU had a turnout of around two-thirds of the membership and a substantial majority for action.

Whereas in the case of the PCS, NUT or Unison participation rates rarely exceed one-third of the membership. It seems that in white collar public sector unions there is only a small proportion of the membership which has the kind of trade union consciousness which is still evident in industrial unions like the FBU and RMT and in the post office with the CWU.

So what should militants be doing to address these issues in public sector unions?

there is also an atmosphere of politically motivated witch-hunting in Unison, which has already seen the expulsion of several important left activists including Tony Staunton and Yunus Bakhsh, and charges brought against the four London-based Socialist Party militants.

Still, there are signs that the left could do rather well in the upcoming elections for the whole of the national executive in the spring of 2009, given there is undoubtedly a substantial minority that is totally fed up with what has happened over pay, among other issues, in the past couple of years. There is, however, a tendency, most explicitly voiced by but not limited to the Socialist Party, that argues that if only the left takes over the executive all will be well, with the converse being that if the current leadership retains a majority on the executive all is gloom and doom for the foreseeable future.

Militants in Unison should look to the experience of the NUT to see the danger of such a strategy. The current acting General Secretary of the NUT, Christine Blower, is a member of the Campaign for a Democratic and Fighting Union and a former election candidate for the London Socialist Alliance. The CDFU, alongside the Socialist Teachers Alliance, now have a majority on the Executive. Yet, as

NUT rep victimised over dress code challenge

ADRIAN SWAIN is the NUT rep at St Paul's Way School in Tower Hamlets. He is currently being disciplined by management for failing to comply with the school's dress code. The code was imposed on staff in the autumn term with no consultation whatsoever. Adrian has been given a final written warning for misconduct (for failing to obey a "reasonable instruction" of the headteacher) and he faces a hearing in December which could result in his dismissal.

Adrian's "offence" is that he wears trainers and tracksuit bottoms, as he has done for the last 35 years. These items of clothing are now proscribed under the code, which is operated under the catch all command to "dress professionally", a fashion sense entirely at the discretion of the head.

Management's treatment of Adrian is, of course, a particularly squalid and transparent form of victimisation. Adrian, a supporter of this journal, is a communist militant with decades of experience in the labour movement. The St Paul's Way NUT group has a reputation as one of the best organised union groups in London. It has defended working conditions over a long period, thwarted various management attacks and has a proud history of honouring picket lines. It has also been ready to embrace political trade unionism – most inspiringly when its members took strike action on the day the war against Iraq began in March 2003.

Adrian has been a key figure in all of these struggles. Management clearly hope to weaken the union group by attacking its rep and it is important to see this attack in the context of the general situation facing NUT members at the school.

St Paul's Way School was given a "notice to improve" and in September its governing body was replaced by an Interim Executive Board (IEB), some of whom are notorious union busters. Teachers at the school face huge increases both in workload and monitoring by management. The school has a budget deficit and the headteacher has indicated that redundancies will be used to balance the books. She has also indicated that there will be a more extensive use of "capability" procedures, a method of sacking staff. Already one NUT member has been pressured into resigning.

As Adrian has pointed out tirelessly, the imposition of a dress code is directly linked to these attacks. It is one more mechanism by which management intends to exert its control over the staff, perhaps with the aim of facilitating the school's privatisation through the creation of an Academy.

One would think it would be an automatic reflex for any decent

Association (ELTA) is supposed to be a stronghold of the left. It is led by members of the Socialist Teachers Alliance (STA), some of whom are also members of the Socialist Workers Party. However, when members of the St Paul's Way NUT group brought an emergency resolution to a branch meeting in October seeking ELTA's backing for a campaign to defend Adrian, the ELTA leadership and members of the SWP argued vehemently against the resolution. Adrian was told that he must back down, that the campaign was unwinnable and that it would be impossible to persuade NUT members to support him.

The resolution contained some very basic solidarity points. It called upon the "ELTA Secretary to write to the Headteacher and the Chair of the IEB condemning the decision to begin disciplinary proceedings against Adrian Swain and to send a mailing to all NUT groups in Tower Hamlets informing them of the campaign and encouraging them to support it." What sort of trade unionist could be opposed to this resolution? What kind of socialist would object to a letter being written to condemn a disciplinary attack on an NUT rep, or to a mailing to NUT members encouraging them to support a campaign in defence of this rep?

The St Paul's Way NUT group has a reputation as one of the best organised union groups in London. It has a proud history of honouring picket lines

trade unionist to jump to Adrian's defence; and indeed he has received considerable support from activists in his own union group and beyond. What is deeply disturbing, though, is that sections of the NUT left in Tower Hamlets have not only refused to support him but have actively obstructed the development of a campaign in his defence.

The NUT branch in Tower Hamlets, East London Teachers

The ELTA leadership was, however, united in its hostility to the resolution. In fact, Adrian – it was implied – was just being silly in refusing to accept management's instruction. In the end the motion fell 11-11. The ELTA leadership had, scandalously, denied Adrian the support of his local association. Since the October meeting the ELTA Secretary and NUT Executive member Alex Kenny has continued

to argue (in various meetings and in many emails) that Adrian must back down. Adrian is making, according to Kenny, “a gross error of judgment”. Any idea that the membership might be mobilised to defeat management is rejected out of hand.

The ELTA secretary’s ongoing attempts to undermine the campaign in defence of Adrian have been vigorously backed up by, Paul McGarr, an SWP member at St Paul’s Way, who has argued in meeting after meeting that Adrian must inevitably lose. Of course, the lack of support from ELTA has had its impact on the school group, increasing its sense of isolation and weariness.

After being told by Kenny and McGarr that Adrian would be suspended the next day and the group would lose their rep, they voted to “urge” Adrian to conform with the dress code. It is not surprising that members of a school group, threatened with losing their valued rep and denied any support from their local association, felt they had no other option.

The explanation for the attitudes and actions of the ELTA leadership lies in their politics – in the terrible weaknesses of the “broad leftism” that is at the heart of the STA project and in the SWP’s continued rightward evolution. Whilst the STA sometimes campaigns for national action, it is wary of action from below, of “messy” local disputes. Increasingly, these must be prevented.

The SWP, since it re-entered the STA, believes that it is the left leaders, like Alex Kenny, who will deliver action. Alliances must be sought with them and defended at all costs. The irony is, of course, that the left leaders on whom the SWP depend have just voted (on the NUT Executive) to call off strike action on pay!

This sign of weakness has led various school managements to go onto the offensive. In the last month alone not only has Adrian been victimised but the rep at Raines School has been sacked after nearly a year’s suspension. In Hackney a teacher has been given a

written warning for wearing a tiny eyebrow piercing and union activists within the school are being threatened with capability procedures.

Evidence that this use of dress codes to victimise members was becoming increasingly generalised (there are other cases in Westminster) led Hackney Teachers Association to pass a resolution in November calling for a joint campaign against these attacks, and asking for the support of other

associations throughout the area. Scandalously SWP members in Hackney put an amendment deleting support for Adrian. This was soundly defeated with only three SWP members voting for the amendment. The original motion went on to be carried unanimously. Hopefully this kind of clear solidarity and the support pledged by Hackney NUT will inspire the St Paul’s Way group and reinvigorate the campaign to support Adrian.

An NUT member

EDUCATION

Teachers’ strike shows how to defeat Academies

ON 17 November at a public meeting in Derby over 200 parents, pupils, school governors and teachers voted unanimously against the city council’s plans to turn Sinfin Community School into a privately run academy. This was an “unofficial” vote and the city council may still press ahead with their plans regardless of the eventual outcome of the official consultation which runs until 15 December. However, it is a huge boost to the Derby campaign.

In Sheffield last month another consultation over an academy took place. Unfortunately the ballot of parents of Parkwood School students and selected feeder schools was in favour of the school in Shirecliffe being taken out of public control and handed to Edutrust, the proposed private sponsors. The ballot was lost by 83 votes to 199 on a 23.9% turnout despite the efforts of the North Sheffield Anti-Academies Alliance.

On the face of it the situations facing the two campaigns are similar: both schools have had difficult histories and have been identified as “failing” in the past. Both have in the last few years started to turn things round and show improvements in exam results

and Ofsted inspection reports. Both are large city secondary schools with working class catchments in areas of deprivation. However, in Derby the meeting in November came after 6 days of strike action by Sinfin Community School’s NASUWT and NUT members.

The lessons of the Sheffield defeat are brought into focus by the example of Sinfin, where strike action clearly galvanised the local campaign and will certainly make the council think hard before pursuing the academy plans with such strong and united opposition from workers and the community.

Having been involved in the Sheffield campaign, it’s clear to me that what was missing at Parkwood was any real support from organised teachers (whether working at Parkwood or elsewhere in the city), let alone industrial action. Despite all the paper policies against academies locally and nationally, the Sheffield campaign was mostly made up of the usual suspects of the local left including a few teachers, a couple of parents and some local governors (but not from Parkwood). Regional NUT reps turned out for a couple of meetings and leafleting sessions but that was it. The teaching staff at Parkwood itself either publicly supported the

academy proposal and the pro-academy Head or were not to be seen at all. This clearly says something about the power of a popular head versus a weak local labour movement.

With the No campaign having few allies inside the school itself, the council were able to bribe parents into backing the academy proposal – in fact, given the odds stacked in their favour, the surprise is that they didn't win by a greater margin!

The council promised that there would be funding for a new school building to the tune of £15 million if the vote was yes, and glossy brochures from Edutrust were sent out with ballot papers to every voter. Roadshow events were held at Parkwood School and feeder schools that excluded the No campaign.

At public meetings organised by the council and Edutrust the No campaign had to speak from the floor. In addition, the addresses and telephone numbers of parents were available for the use of the pro-academy campaign but not to the anti-campaign and a letter in favour was sent to every parent from David Blunkett, the local MP.

The Sheffield ballot was the first

ballot of parents on an academy proposal in the country. It was described as a "consultative" ballot by the Liberal Democrat council, so there was always the concern that even if we had won, the council would have gone ahead anyway.

Sinfin is to have its own ballot, as are other places where academies are proposed, such as Preston. But the Sinfin example shows the way. We cannot rely on winning consultative ballots to defeat the academy programme. Workers' organisation and strike action are needed.

Once a school becomes an academy the ability of staff to organise and fight for their rights and the rights of their students will be weakened, pay and conditions will become vulnerable and, as has been seen in schools that have already become academies where union facility time has been withdrawn, the basic right to organise will be attacked.

The teachers at Sinfin should be applauded throughout the labour movement for showing that it is possible to organise strike action against privatisation. Other workers must follow their example.

Alison Higgins

indication of the limits of his left talking. For his part, Simpson was soon recognised as one of the key props within the union movement for New Labour.

Unite is a mainstay of the Labour Party. The £11 million it has handed New Labour in donations since 2005 totals 41% of all donations the party received in that period. And, while it has talked to the left of the likes of Unison, when the vote on a clear call for united strike action took place at the 2008 TUC Congress mysteriously the Unite voting cards went missing and the union effectively abstained, ensuring the vote was lost.

Backing New Labour at the expense of members' interests proved an expensive pastime for the bureaucrats. Unlike the PCS and RMT – unions that have grown through organising drives and strike actions to defend their members – in real terms Amicus and TGWU membership shrank. The numbers being recruited were not enough to keep up with those leaving.

The amalgamation made sense to Simpson and Woodley as a "business merger". Both unions were losing members and saw a pooling of financial and organisational resources as a key means of protecting their long term existence. The full merger was supposed to have been consummated in November 2008, with the dissolution of the separate Amicus and TGWU sections. By now we should have all just been members of "Unite the Union", pushing on to protect our members' jobs, wages and conditions.

At least that was the plan.

Now the plan has been ripped up. On 9 October the Amicus National Executive voted to suspend the joint rule book that had been approved by 93% of the members in a ballot of the membership. They have delayed the full merger for at least six months and called an election for the General Secretary of the Amicus section, which is to be concluded on 9 March 2009.

The new general secretary elected will be in office for one year, from December 2009 to December

UNITE THE UNION

Not so much united – more at war with itself

UNITE THE Union was formed out of a merger of the TGWU and Amicus in May 2007. It is a superunion with sectors in virtually every industry and service. Its formation was heralded as the birth of a new age of trade unionism, complete with declarations of undying love between the leaders of the two partners in marriage, Derek Simpson of Amicus and Tony Woodley of the TGWU.

Both men were elected to their positions as general secretary on a wave of anti-Blair sentiment in their respective unions. Both

promised a militant fightback against attacks on their members and a promise that their unions would not be cheerleaders for Blair (though both were known to have a soft spot for Brown).

It soon became clear that while Simpson and Woodley talked a good fight during their election campaign, neither were prepared to deliver one that actually threatened a serious clash with New Labour. Woodley's panicky retreat from an all out confrontation with Labour over the anti-union laws after the Gate Gourmet strike was a clear

2010. After that, assuming the merger proceeds, there will be another election for a general secretary of a fully merged Unite the Union.

At least that's the plan.

So why has the delay occurred and what's the Amicus General Secretary election really about? The merger is being delayed because Simpson hates Woodley's guts and

war. Instead of being allowed to proceed with the merger at a rank and file level through joint Amicus and TGWU branch meetings, stewards' committees and training events, Amicus has blocked such things. Amicus members were recently informed they could not go on TGWU organised training events. Joint sector meetings have been cancelled.

should abide by it now. Jerry Hicks is a former Amicus Executive member and former Rolls Royce convenor in Bristol, victimised for his trade union activity. He was a Socialist Workers Party (SWP) member but resigned during the rows over Respect, giving his support to the George Galloway MP wing of Respect.

In spring 2008 he called in the Union Certification Officer to make a ruling on Simpson staying on beyond retirement age. By September the certification Officer decided there was a case to answer. The rule book was suspended and an election for an Amicus general secretary was called.

By going to court Jerry Hicks did a disservice to the union – all militants should stand by the principle that the state and its courts and officers have no business interfering in the internal affairs of a union. Going to court should always be a last resort. Nevertheless, the election has now been called. Derek Simpson is standing. So too is Jerry Hicks. Kevin Coyne the North West Regional secretary is also standing, as is Laurence Faircloth, the Regional Secretary in the South West.

A fifth candidate, Paul K Reuter, has also entered the contest. Reuter's platform is anodyne and does not contain a single concrete policy for taking the union forward. It declares that it has no "narrow political agenda". The problem is Reuter has no political agenda at all – and in the current circumstances a political agenda is exactly what the union does need!

A Simpson victory will set the union back. The conflict with Woodley will deepen and the possibility of the merger producing two permanently divided sections, TGWU and Amicus, will be strengthened. The union will remain Labour loyal and the drift towards increased bureaucratisation and the imperious appointment and sacking of officers and closures of branches that oppose Simpson will continue.

Kevin Coyne is identified with the right of the union, with alleged links to the "ATU" group which, in

While a general union such as Unite is not the best option for workers – an industrial union is a far better model – the members have voted overwhelmingly for it

sees any progress in the unity of the two sections as a personal threat to his power base.

After winning an election against Blairite Sir Ken Jackson with the backing of the left, Simpson moved right at speed. He sacked a whole number of union employees who had helped him beat Jackson because they were left wingers (a tribunal found that they had been unfairly dismissed). He broke all his links with the Amicus Unity Gazette, the organised left in the union. He set up the "Workers Uniting Group" in Amicus in collaboration with right wingers who had previously opposed him. He established a style of leadership that Stalin would have been proud of. And he put the union at the disposal of New Labour.

Woodley has a different approach and promotes an "organising model" of trade unionism that is more confrontational and relies on activists rather than officials. It clashes with the lobbying and still heavily service style unionism that Simpson prefers. This does not mean Woodley is much better than Simpson. And his refusal to back the Gate Gourmet workers with the full might of the union is a reminder of that.

But his preferred style of building the union is one Simpson is implacably opposed to. The result of this difference is a bureaucratic turf

While a general union such as Unite is not the best option for workers – an industrial union uniting all workers in one sector is a far better model – the members have voted overwhelmingly for it and there is considerable scope within the new rule book for organising powerful sectors of Unite that can, and must, operate on the model of industrial unions.

That unity between Amicus and TGWU members should be achieved sooner rather than later. Its delay will have set back the united fight against the impact of the recession and diverted members away from such a fight by trying to line them up behind a bureaucratic power struggle.

But why does all of this mean there has to be an election for a new General Secretary of Amicus? In the midst of the gang fight between Simpson and Woodley, Simpson and his supporters made it clear that he would remain in office until the end of 2009. This would put Simpson past retirement age. So what? Well, when Sir Ken Jackson tried to prolong his life as General Secretary beyond retirement age he was challenged on these grounds by Simpson. The Government's Union Certification Officer ruled in favour of Simpson, an election was called and Sir Ken Jackson was history.

Simpson won by the retirement rule so, reasoned Jerry Hicks, he

2005, opposed a rule change to agree to the election of officers in Amicus. He is keen on the merger but is equally keen on keeping the united union "on message" as far as the Labour party is concerned. The left should not vote for any of these candidates.

Jerry Hicks did himself no favours with his maverick court action. He also made things worse when he failed to attend a national meeting of the union's left, the Amicus Unity Gazette, in November 2008 in order to win it to his support. It was almost as though he was saying, I am standing no matter what and I don't want the organised left in the union to have any say in that.

Although Jerry's platform emphasises union democracy, the repeal of the anti-union laws, defence of final salary pensions and opposition to privatisation it is not substantially different to that of the man who did attend the national Gazette meeting, Laurence Faircloth. Indeed, ironically given Hicks is in Respect, it is Faircloth's platform that explicitly states that the union will consider backing candidates who support union policies and stand against Labour.

As a result of attending the Gazette meeting Faircloth emerged as the national candidate backed by the largest left wing grouping in Amicus. And the SWP, for example, have now agreed to back him as a result. They commented that the failure of their former member, Hicks, to attend was "regrettable". It certainly made it difficult to argue for the left to support anyone other than Faircloth, despite a past during which he was identified with the right wing in the AEEU.

Whether the left vote remains split between Hicks and Faircloth remains to be seen. What are effectively "primaries" are already underway, with each candidate seeking nominations from branches and shop stewards. If, by some outside chance, Hicks gets more nominations than Faircloth then the Gazette should obviously review its position. If Faircloth gets more then Hicks should review his. Come the election the one with the least nominations should stand down so

there is no danger of a split vote on the left.

If the one with fewer nominations decides to press ahead as a candidate they will be regarded by all serious militants as someone who put their personal ambitions before the needs of the members. They will not deserve the votes of left activists if they do this.

The election will have an impact on the needs of the members. If either Coyne or Simpson win then, whatever the fate of the merger, Amicus members will be in a weaker position to organise a fightback against the effects of the recession than they would be if a left candidate wins.

This is not to create the illusion that whoever wins won't be

susceptible to bureaucratic pressure in exactly the same way that Simpson was. Without genuine rank and file democracy any general secretary will fall under the sway of bureaucratism.


It is to recognise that militants have to use every opening - including the election of a general secretary elected on a left platform - to help rebuild the union's strength at a rank and file level. That is why a single united left candidate must emerge from the nominations process.

But our overriding goal is to begin to tilt the balance of forces away from the whole bureaucracy and fashion a democratic, fighting union worthy of the name Unite.

by a Unite/Amicus member

PROSTITUTION

Sex workers need rights not moralising laws

 HARRIET HARMAN and Jacqui Smith are on the warpath, and their enemy is men. These men, they say, abuse and exploit women, using their economic power to keep women from living full and meaningful lives.

Who are these evil men? Perhaps they are thinking of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair when they set the minimum wage at £5.73 an hour? Or the employers who insist on a "flexible workforce" that condemns women to low pay and part time work, struggling to pay fuel bills and feed the kids? Or the men who run the banks that are busily repossessing people homes and throwing families on the streets? Sadly not. The men these two self-styled feminists are hunting are the men who pay for sex.

Last year the government tried to take us down the Swedish road, where it is a crime to pay for sex. They withdrew their proposed amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill when they realised the strength of opposition. This year they are

bringing it back in another form in the hope of getting it through the back door. They are proposing that it be an absolute offence "to pay for sex with someone who is controlled for another person's gain."

They argue that this will tackle the specific problem of trafficked sex workers and those who are held by pimps. They hope this will reduce demand from clients - and if there are no clients there will be no need for sex workers, and thus no money to be made by the traffickers and pimps who will presumably go and find respectable jobs instead. Maybe they could go and get jobs as bankers, using their intricate knowledge of ruthless exploitation and greed.

Let's be in no doubt. There are many traffickers and pimps who are extremely violent and exploitative, and they should be punished. These men effectively imprison and rape women, both of which are already illegal. There are also many other men who exploit their partners and use violence, terror and rape to

repress them. There are laws against these crimes too. Yet, Jacqui Smith's criminal justice system has failed to use existing laws to effectively protect sex workers or other women from violence, rape and domestic violence. Only 6% of reported rape offences result in a conviction – and the women who take these cases continue to report being further abused by the process, often regretting their decision.

The police have plenty of laws to use against the perpetrators of rape, trafficking and domestic abuse, but don't. And with such low conviction rates the police are likely to be reluctant to even take cases on.

So why the proposed new laws? The government is determined to pursue its moralistic campaign against sex work. The proposals also include a further crackdown on kerb-crawlers, and requirements for

special licensing arrangements for lap dancing clubs, all of which are designed to drive prostitution further underground.

The government is justifying its new proposals by suggesting that trafficking and pimping are the norm in the sex industry. They bandy about figures that are completely made up.

First they repeat the claim that there are around 80,000 women in

CONVENTION OF THE LEFT

Recall conference meets in January

THE NEXT national meeting of the Convention of the Left is planned for Saturday 24 January 2009. The theme of the one-day conference is "Capitalism isn't working – what is the alternative?"

It will be held at the Friends' Meeting House, Manchester, from 11am-5pm (registration from 10.00am). There will be plenaries and a series of workshops looking at implications of the capitalist crisis around the topics Planet, People and Peace. The aim is to start to develop an alternative socialist/left response. Voting on proposals coming from the workshops and a motion on developing the Convention will be taken in the final session.

More details (plus downloadable leaflet, advance registration and discussion contributions) can be found at:

www.conventionofthelleft.org

Motion from organisers

Convention of The Left – moving forward – Statement of Action

The September launch of the Convention of The Left exceeded expectations and was a significant event on the left. We must now work out how to build on this positive beginning. We re-affirm our intention "to join together with all those seeking a better society, as

an anti-capitalist left fighting for an alternative socialist society" (21 September 2008 Statement of Intent).

Local Campaigning

To do this effectively we must "go local" – building local Conventions, experimenting with organisational and political models, learning from each other and from experience, building on "what works", with an emphasis on bottom up campaigning, participation and decision making.

Local Convention of The Left groups or forums should develop a combination of campaigning and political discussion – not duplicating other campaigns or seeking to replace them, but drawing the left together in co-operation and struggle. We should go out of our way to overcome the division that exists between the organised left and the direct actionist and libertarian groups.

Campaigns should be developed and supported locally. Already some local groups have taken a lead in actions coming out of the financial crisis, on house repossessions, on fuel poverty and energy costs. Other areas of activity might include anti-academy campaigns, defence of local GP surgeries against poly-clinics, campaigns against privatisations, in support of migrants and opposing deportations, fighting the fascist threat.

Local Convention of The Lefts should be encouraged to:

1. produce reports for a local convention section of the website
2. discuss demands and programs of action around their struggles
3. submit these demands and charters to the Convention website and future events for further discussion.

National Campaigning

We re-affirm that this is not the construction of another political party. Rather, the strength of the Convention lies in attempting to bring local groupings together and to provide a wider forum for discussion and united action – so that we can strengthen the anti capitalist left by uniting ourselves around action and policies where we can.

The Recall Event on 24 January 2009 should elect a steering committee to build on the work of the group that organised Manchester 2008's Convention. This steering committee should be charged with organising or co-ordinating future activity – such as a further day or weekend Convention in summer 2009 – and with exploring the possibilities of a similar event at TUC and/or Labour Party Conference in Brighton 2009 as was organised in Manchester 2008.

the sex industry in the UK. This is an extremely crude estimate that was made in the early 1990s, and no-one seems to have looked at whether it has changed. The next figure is that 70% of the 88,000 women involved in prostitution in England and Wales are under the control of traffickers, a claim made by the Metropolitan Police. How do they know? That makes about 62,000 trafficked women.

Odd then, that when the police mounted two massive exercises (using existing laws by the way) to “rescue” some of these women, they found it hard to find these women. The operations involved 55 police forces which between them raided 1,300 premises. They “rescued” only 260 victims, most of whom appear to have been later deported.

The truth is that they have hyped the figures in order to try and introduce laws to further outlaw prostitution. The drive comes from an understanding that all prostitution is wrong. “I don’t accept that prostitution is ever a reasonable choice for a woman”, argued Harman last year.” Jacqui Smith explained “My proposal is that men should think twice about paying for sex. The reason they should do that is actually the majority of women don’t want to be involved in prostitution.”

Of course lots of people in sex work do not want to do it and would rather do something else. Lots of people who work as cleaners, in fast food restaurants or call centres don’t want to do that either, but they have to work. Under capitalism workers can only survive by selling their labour power (i.e. getting a job) and the choices available are always limited.

Sex work is one of those choices, often forced, which some people make because it is often better paid and more flexible than the alternatives available to them at the time. Others choose it because they enjoy it, a statement that the anti-sex work feminists cannot accept.

Since they knew outlawing the purchase of sex completely was not going to win, the government have decided to opt for this selective route. Unfortunately for them the

law would be completely unworkable, and there is a possibility that it will be thrown out for this reason. The technicality of making it an “absolute offence” means that there is no defence.

If a man is found to have paid a woman for sex, the fact that he did not know that she was being controlled is no defence. And the definition of being controlled is unclear but in practice has been

We don’t like it – that is why we are socialists – and the answer is to fight it through collective organisation of the workers to take over and run things directly. The same strategy applies in the sex industry – the workers should be organised and fight against exploitation and abuse. Many sex workers are organised, in the International Union of Sex Workers (part of the GMB) for example, but

The suggestion is that it is wrong to control someone for another person’s gain – but surely that is what capitalism is all about?

used very broadly. If a sex worker works from home and shares her income with her husband, he can be seen as controlling her for his gain. Similarly someone who runs a brothel, or even a maid working in a flat, could be included.

The suggestion is that it is wrong to control someone for another person’s gain – but surely that is what capitalism is all about? For anyone who has forgotten their basic Marxism, capitalism is based on the creation of surplus value, in which the boss extracts more value from the worker’s labour than they pay the worker for their labour. It is called exploitation, and it is the essence of the system.

the government does not allow them to speak for themselves since they believed they are pathetic victims, incapable of taking an active part in their own future.

We should resist this new legislation, and continue to fight for the decriminalisation of prostitution, support the organising of sex workers to fight for control of their industry. The alternative is to risk criminalising the one in ten men who pay for sex at some time and to drive the industry further underground into the hands of the pimps and traffickers who can only thrive in conditions of illegality.

Helen Ward

VENEZUELA ELECTIONS

Union leaders murdered as right goes on attack

▶ AT THE end of November, a day after Venezuelan’s went to the polls in regional elections, three local trade union leaders were gunned down in the state of Aragua. They were killed in the “Colombian manner” dying in a hail of machine gun bullets fired by

a hired killer on the back of a motorbike.

It was no coincidence that these trade unionists were leading a struggle against a Colombian employer, or that the day before they had been aiding workers attacked by the Aragua state police

aligned with outgoing opposition governor Didalco Bolívar. Bolívar was previously allied with Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian movement but had, like many other prominent Bolivarians, defected to the right wing opposition during the constitutional referendum of 2007 – a referendum Chávez lost.

In the Aragua state election the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) of Hugo Chávez retook the state, but in other important states and urban centres PSUV candidates were defeated. One result of this has been an offensive by the right, with Cuban doctors in medical centres being attacked, attempts made to close down local left run TV stations and seizures of local Communal Council offices.

This should not be surprising, given the history of many of the new right wing governors and municipal mayors – several of them were active leaders in the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002 – for example Henrique Radonsky, the new governor of Miranda state, Antonio Ledezma, the new Metropolitan Mayor of Caracas and Enrique Salas Feo, who won in Carabobo state. They all benefited from Chávez's decision to issue an amnesty to the coupmongers shortly after he was restored to power by the masses – now they are using the electoral process, backed up by thuggery on the streets and plenty of US State Department dollars, to achieve what they couldn't do by force.

Chávez and his newly formed PSUV certainly certainly did not do disastrously in the regional elections. They won 17 out of 22 state governors and about 80% of local councils. While the total vote for PSUV candidates was down on Chávez's results in the 2006 presidential elections (5.5 million votes in November compared to 7.3 million in 2006) it was up more than a million on the disastrous showing in the lost constitutional referendum. Turnout too was up, 65%, compared with 50% in the last regional elections, but then many of the right wing parties boycotted the polls.

But the right wing victories were

significant. They won the Metropolitan District of Caracas, the capital, and Miranda state, which includes important suburbs. They control other important urban centres like Maracaibo, and economically important states like Carabobo and Zulia.

This gives the right wing important power bases to organise to oust the left and take control of the streets and barrios. It gives them control over finance, housing and the police forces in those areas, all of which will be used to undermine the workers' struggle for change.

Many of the losses were brought about by the corruption and inefficiencies of the "Bolivarian bureaucracy". Chávez's local government leaders have failed to deliver: rubbish still piles up in the poor barrios, while crime and corruption at a local level are rife.

Right wing PSUV bureaucrats like Diosdado Cabello, who lost Miranda state, was so unpopular with the base of the PSUV that he could not even get elected into the leadership until, that was, Chávez rescued him and appointed him a vice president of the party! It is little wonder that working class voters failed to turn out for Cabello and the state fell to the right.

Following the killing of the three trade unionists in Zulia and the offensive by the right in other areas Stalin Pérez Borges, one of the co-ordinators of the UNT and a member of the PSUV, has correctly called for workers to organise self-defence.

"The government" he said "must grant all the resources for the training and armed defence of the workers and their leaders. It will not be the corrupt police, in many cases the direct assassins, who will prevent these crimes. It will be us, the workers. We propose . . . our own self-defence against fascism."

Pérez Borges is absolutely right, but to achieve such an objective will mean a real struggle against the "Bolivarian bureaucracy" and against the leadership of the PSUV itself.

Stuart King

See our website for an international statement of protest by **REVOLUTION – independent youth organisation Permanent Revolution UK and Revolutionär-sozialistische Organisation**

<http://www.permanentrevolution.net/entry/2434>

ZIMBABWE

Mugabe clings to power: interview with ISO

BACK IN the summer Permanent Revolution interviewed the national co-ordinator of Zimbabwe's International Socialist Organisation, Mike Sambo. He predicted then that Mugabe would stall negotiations with the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and that the MDC offers no way forward for the working class and small farmers of Zimbabwe. He says that what is needed is a grassroots rebuilding of the movement to organise a popular revolt.

On 28 November 2008 Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC officially withdrew from negotiations with Mugabe, over South African former president Mbeki's ultimatum that they share the Home Affairs Ministry with Zanu-PF. However, this doesn't at all represent the MDC breaking with Zanu PF and organising an insurgency. They are merely jockeying for better positions and this represents essentially what Mike Sambo predicted as Mugabe uses

negotiations to “cling to power and divide the MDC”.

In contrast to this, what is immediately needed is a programme of permanent revolution – to bring workers and small farmers into struggle around the urgent day to day questions of food, water, and security and link these with the need for a workers’ government by establishing now, as matter of urgent survival, workers’ control of production and distribution.

We reproduce here an edited version of our interview with Mike Sambo.

PR: Can you tell us about the situation in Zimbabwe following the elections?

MS: Following the parliamentary and presidential elections in March 2008, which most observers saw as being won by the MDC, the country has been in crisis as Mugabe forced a run-off presidential election in June. Inflation was running at over 5 million per cent, 80% are unemployment, the country was in crisis.

Mugabe stole the elections, both the one in March and in June, which was not something surprising to us as we predicted that the only way he could win was by deception – by hook or by crook. Mugabe just wants to use elections to facilitate an illusion of legitimacy and disorient the opposition. Now of course he is using talks about a national unity government to cling to power and divide the MDC.

PR: What is your attitude to the MDC and its tactics?

MS: We thought it was right for the MDC to withdraw from the run-off elections. It was a positive move and should have been done from the beginning as it was always obvious that Mugabe would win come what may – by intimidating voters, by rigging, by whatever means he needed to undertake. They should have used the withdrawal as a tactic to draw the people into struggle, not negotiations to consider forming a government of national unity.

This has left them open to the

situation where now MDC structures are weakened and decimated so that a revolt organised by the MDC is not immediately possible. We were involved in the formation of the MDC back in the late 90s when it was formed out of the trade unions and workers’ movement but now it has been hijacked in its leadership by elements

Mugabe is a clever political operator who will use the negotiations to get what he wants whether a rotten deal with some in the MDC or to carve them out completely

of the capitalist class and white farmers leading us to leave.

PR: Why did you then call for a vote for the MDC in the March elections? Do you see it as some kind of bourgeois workers’ party?

MS: That’s a good question and we’ve had a lot of debates on this. Despite the capitalist policies of those at the top, many workers still looked to the MDC as the only alternative.

Actually after the March elections the MDC had a golden opportunity – there was a short period when people were ready to defend the vote, to come out on to the streets and force Mugabe out. Rather than this we saw the MDC leaders fleeing the country, thus squandering any opportunity for uprising, and then later entering negotiations but with no realistic way forward for Zimbabwe’s workers.

Mugabe is a very clever political operator who will use the negotiations to get what he wants whether a rotten deal with some in the MDC or to carve them out completely. The results of the elections told us that we had to change our previous attitude of unconditional but critical support for the MDC.

PR: Why has Mugabe been able to survive and cling on to power?

MS: Mugabe has always been very

crafty. When the MDC were powerful in 2000/01 he outflanked them from the left, organising the land grabs which led to some support in the rural areas. Since then though there has been a significant erosion of the support that ZANU-PF (Mugabe’s party) enjoyed both in the countryside and a complete collapse in the cities,

except amongst the very rich.

Actually sometimes people don’t realise that the economic crisis has led to booming times for the rich. Private health businesses are flourishing for example, with a corrupt caste offered fraudulent exchange rates in return for political loyalty and others benefitting from plunder of the Congo.

The elite are fine whilst the masses are starving. Many of the ordinary people are voting with their stomachs and leaving the country, with up to 20% left to South Africa and other neighbouring countries. One of the reasons Mugabe’s entered into negotiations is because ZANU-PF need the help of the opposition or at least to neutralise them. He is playing as always a very crafty game.

PR: What is your message to those advocating sanctions?

MS: We are completely against imperialist intervention by either military means or sanctions that just harm the poor. We are for international solidarity for the workers’ movement and workers’ actions such as the Durban dockers, who refused earlier in the year to unload 77 tonnes of arms bound for Zimbabwe.

PR: What is the strength of the ISO? What are the tasks ahead? How can

we help?

MS: We have some 300 members at the moment. Most of our members are unable to work due to the economic crisis and many are either in hiding or keeping a low profile after our offices were forcibly closed down earlier this year.

We need maximum publicity about what is happening, we need people internationally to know

everything and if possible organise international solidarity like those workers in South Africa and where possible organise donations form the labour movements. We're very interested in dialogue and discussions with socialists and labour movement activists internationally.

Only students who go to the top-tier school, the "Gymnasium", at age 12 even have a chance to enter university – statistically, these are mostly students from better-off families.

It's still not possible to give a full overview of the protests, but on November 12 there were: 10,000 school students on strike in Braunschweig, 8,500 in Hannover, 8,000 in Berlin, 8,000 in Stuttgart, 7,000 in Bremen, 6,000 in Hamburg, 5,000 in Rostock, 4,500 in Kiel, 4,000 in Oldenburg, 5,000 in Lüneburg, 2,000 in Lübeck, 4,000 in Bremerhaven, 3,000 in Kassel, 3,000 in Frankfurt am Main, 2,500 in Göttingen, 2,000 in Cologne, 2,000 in Munich, 2,000 in Nürnberg – and thousands more in 20 further cities. In Potsdam, 150 students demonstrated spontaneously through the city centre before occupying a train and going to Berlin. In Dresden, there was a school students' block at a university students' demonstration with 6,000 participants.

This exceeded all expectations of the organisers. Aimo Belling from the Kiel strike committee commented: "The last time that 5,000 people demonstrated in Kiel on a weekday in November was probably in 1918", referring to the German Revolution which broke out

GERMANY

One hundred thousand school students strike

▶ ONE HUNDRED thousand school students across Germany went on strike on Wednesday 12 November. In more than 40 cities there were rallies and demonstrations instead of classes. In many places university students and teachers expressed solidarity. This could be the first step towards a massive protest movement by students in Germany, similar to the movements that have been shaking Italy and Greece.

But unlike in Italy or Greece, there is no single reform that sparked the protests. Germany's federal state model means that the country has 16 different education systems, all with different rules. For example, roughly half of the federal states have introduced tuition fees at universities, but the others have not. This has always made it difficult to organise student protests at a national level: when thousands of students in the state of Hesse are fighting against the introduction of tuition fees, the students in Berlin feel like they are not affected.

The national walkout – the first one since the school strikes against the Iraq War in March 2003 – was provoked by the general state of the German educational system, which has been deteriorating for years.

The specific problems might be different from state to state, but everywhere one finds the same general features: overcrowded classrooms with 30 pupils or more

and a lack of teachers which leads to classes being cancelled. There is also the reform of the "Abitur" programme (the high school certificate which qualifies for university). The proposal is to shorten it from nine to eight years without reducing the subjects to be learned.

The strike was also directed against Germany's three-tiered school system, which leads to education levels in Germany being more closely tied to social status than in any other developed country. Benjamin Müller, one of

In Berlin, the Humboldt University was stormed: hundreds of young people forced their way into the ceremonial room and waved red flags from the balcony

the organisers, commented to the press:

"The constant degradations in schools and the lack of perspectives mean that many school students feel a sense of rage when they see educational institutions, especially universities, which remain inaccessible to people from poor backgrounds due to the social selection in the three-tiered school system. It appears for many as a form of oppression."

in the city exactly ninety years ago.

Because one-day strikes aren't enough, in the course of the day there were also more radical forms of protest. In Hannover, school students blocked the state parliament and they were brutally attacked by police. In Berlin, the Humboldt University was stormed: hundreds of young people forced their way into the ceremonial room and waved red flags from the balcony. In Erfurt, there was a brief

occupation of the school administration building. In Oldenburg, a school was occupied and alternative classes were offered in the morning.

At the Humboldt University, an exhibition in the foyer dealing with the persecution of Jewish businessmen under the Nazi regime was damaged. The organisers of the school strike in Berlin immediately released a statement that they deeply regretted any damage to an exhibition – “especially one about German fascism, which is dealt with less and less in schools”. The bourgeois media and the university president used the damage to the exhibition to start a massive campaign against the school strike, accusing the students of being an anti-semitic mob – as if the mass protests had merely been a feint in order to destroy memorials of Jewish life in Berlin!

Even though most observers felt that the damage to the exhibition was caused by shoving as 1,000 young people crowded their way through the small foyer, the university president spoke of “an assassination attempt against our fellow citizens of Jewish origin and the democratic values of the country”. Right-wing bloggers even said the school students were acting like Hitler’s “SA in 1933”!

This cynical argumentation is supposed to discredit the strike and keep it from spreading – clearly, the ruling class is worried that the 100,000 protesters could be a spark which sets off a much bigger fire.

School officials and police responded to the strikes with all kinds of repression. Students who wanted to go on strike were threatened with absences, official censures or even a failing grade for the day – in some schools, the principals even locked the doors to prevent students leaving, which is a flagrant violation of the fire codes. They argued that students have no legal right to strike, which is disputed amongst jurists – but indisputable is the fact is that workers didn’t always have a legal right to strike either, and they won it precisely by organising strikes!

The police also did their best to

scare young people away from making use of their right to protest. Students in Hannover and Dresden were brutally attacked and arrested when they approached the parliament buildings. The closing rally at the strike in Berlin was violently dissolved by the police, who injured more than a dozen very young people.

Here the Left Party, which in

wide alliances.

The independent youth organisation REVOLUTION helped organise the strikes and demonstrations in Berlin, Kiel, Dresden and Potsdam. We put a special emphasis on building solidarity between the school strikes and workers’ protests, especially with the striking public sector workers (including some

The education protests in Germany will continue. To work out a strategy, we need to look to the education protests of recent years in France, Italy and Greece

countless press releases expressed its solidarity with the students’ protests and which is part of the city’s government coalition, carries the political responsibility for assaulting students as young as 11. Indeed these students were protesting against the education cuts of recent years by the Berlin’s government of the Left Party and the Social Democrats!

In May and June, 40,000 school students in almost a dozen German cities had come out onto the streets. The government promised improvements, but its “education summit” on October 22 – held without the participation of students – didn’t bring any concrete results. So after the summer there was a campaign for a coordinated national strike, which included a congress of 200 students in mid-October. A new congress is now being prepared for mid-December.

To take the movement forward we need a sober assessment of what has happened so far. The organisation of the school students is only just beginning, which means that a lot of the strike organisation was dominated by radical left groups like the Trotskyist “SAV” (CWI section) and the autonomist “Antifa” movement. In the coming period it is essential to build up school students’ committees and working groups in the schools, linked up in neighbourhood or city-

teachers) in Berlin. As we said in our speeches in multiple cities:

“We need to go out onto the streets with the workers! . . . If we want to reach our goals – free and good education for all – we need to fight together! If we fight for the control over the schools and the businesses, we won’t be dependent on the goodwill of the bosses and the politicians on their pay roll.”

The education protests in Germany will continue. To work out a strategy for these protests, we need to “look to the South”, i.e. to the education protests of recent months and years in France, Italy and Greece, where school students, university students and workers went on strike together against cuts in education and social services. In this way, they were able to win their demands again and again.

At the school strike demonstrations last week, the demand for a common strike of students and workers against the miserable state of the education system was very popular. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the workers’ movement needs to be the strategic goal of these education protests.

Wlodek Flakin

Independent youth organization REVOLUTION, Berlin

An updated version of a report from www.onesolutionrevolution.org

AUSTRALIA

Indigenous leader jailed over anti-police protest

IN FAR Northern Queensland, just off the coast of Townsville, a small community of 2,000 can be found on Palm Island. It has been plagued by unemployment, overcrowded housing, epidemics of preventable illnesses and astronomical suicide rates. It has also been the scene of the latest in a long line of injustices surrounding indigenous deaths in custody in Australia.

The island is not traditional land belonging to a particular indigenous nation – it lay disused until 1918, when the Queensland government established it as a penal colony for indigenous people committing heinous “crimes” like seeking to be paid wages in return for working, and engaging in traditional culture (such as dancing, ceremony and speaking native language).

Indigenous Australians with no common links – language, ceremony, family, or nation – were sent to the island in droves, usually completely removed from family. Men arrived in leg irons, while children were delivered straight to the dormitories of the many established Christian missions on the island. All of this was overseen by the government appointed Aboriginal Protector – a cop.

These practises continued right into the 1960s. Older Islanders have experienced imprisoned childhoods and most adults on the island were around when it was compulsory for blacks to salute whites.

Formal independence was granted to the Island’s residents in 1986, allowing a council to be set up as a local governance structure, however the state government stripped resources from the island in return, leaving the council with large debts, no jobs, and no resources to provide basic services like housing.

On 19 November 2004, Mulrunji Doomagee was walking home from a successful fishing trip, drunk. On his way home, he encountered Senior Sergeant Hurley arresting another Palm Island resident, with the assistance of the Indigenous Liaison Officer, Lloyd Bengaroo.

Depending on the version of events you believe, Mulrunji either called Lloyd “a cunt for helping the coppers”, referring to a black man helping the white forces, or sang “Who let the dogs out!” as he continued past. Whatever he said, one hour later, he was found dead in a cell at the station.

When Mulrunji was removed from the police van and taken into the station, he pushed at Hurley, shoving him in the face. Seconds later, the pair were seen to fall over a step into the station. This “fall” resulted in four broken ribs, a

The police were told to leave the island by community leaders – they were told that they had nothing to fear, and the police station was evacuated, and burned

ruptured portal vein, and an almost completely cleaved liver.

Mulrunji, now unconscious was dragged to a cell, where according to the in-cell footage and intercom recordings, he remained unconscious for a few minutes until he woke, writhing and screaming for help, all to no avail. Between 30 to 40 minutes later, another cop came in, gave Mulrunji a kick “to see if he was alright”, and finally realised something may be wrong.

Hurley reported the death, and his good friend Detective Robinson was immediately sent to investigate and extra police sent to the island.

A week later, on November 26, the Palm Island Council facilitated a meeting for all island residents so that the findings of the autopsy could be made public, and questions could be answered. This initial autopsy revealed that the injuries sustained were consistent with falling on a shallow step. This finding was later discredited by a second autopsy.

The riot

In the papers, the mass action was penned as an alcohol-fuelled riot of terror and destruction, where whites feared for their lives. In reality, the Council had closed the canteen dispensing booze to the island, and the mass action of at least half of the islands residents was one of considered discussion after the presenting of the coroner’s report into Mulrunji’s death. It was the application of democratically decided indigenous law.

The police were told to leave the island by community leaders – they were told that they had nothing to fear, and the police station – the symbol of Mulrunji’s death – was evacuated, and burned.

The police presented loaded their guns and departed the station, refusing to use vehicles to transport themselves to the airstrip, nor accepting vehicles offered to them. They later appeared at the hospital, and in the midst of the riot that that apparently threatened the entire island and all life on it, had their wounds – up to and including “lacerations indicative of a paper cut” according to one nurse – tended to by nursing staff who were completely oblivious to the “riot” that passed their very doors.

The response

A state of emergency was declared while the cops were still in the station, and all medical, teaching and support staff – the entire white population – were soon evacuated from the island, many against their will. As the whites were helicoptered out, the various squads of balaclava'd and armoured Tactical Response Group Commandos were flown in, complete with semi-automatic rifles with laser sights, and identification removed for "security reasons".

The following day, at dawn, the police raided numerous homes, threatening men, women and children alike with tazers. Community leader, mayoral candidate and one of the few on the island to have a job, Lex Wotton, was identified by police as the ringleader, and was soon one of the 28 arrested during the raids, tazered repeatedly to the ground in front of his wife and children despite emerging from the porch with his arms in the air upon seeing the police arrive. One of the unidentifiable TRG officers went on to threaten Lex by placing the barrel of his rifle to his daughter's head, while the property was searched.

Those arrested during the raids were taken to Townsville, where the majority eventually faced court and were bailed, on the condition that they remain in Townsville and not return to Palm Island, their homes or their island family.

On 24 October, 2008, four years of further arrests, raids, harassment, and police union bullying later, Lex has been found guilty of inciting a riot by an all white jury. Lex was given a seven year prison sentence – low enough that he and his family won't risk appealing (as this would run the risk of increasing the sentence if not successful), but high enough to serve as a warning to all other indigenous activists and community leaders.

After a lot of campaigning the Queensland government were forced to order a second autopsy, an investigation, and an inquest

into Mulrunji's death, all in the face of a racist media witchhunt. As a result of the actions of the Palm Islanders Chris Hurley also became the first cop in Australia to face trial on any death in custody – a massive win in itself for every Australian who has ever witnessed or been on the pointy end of police brutality.

But while Hurley may have been the first cop to stand trial on such charges, he was not the first to be convicted. He was found not guilty, again by an all-white Townsville jury, and instead received compensation of \$100,000, and a promotion. He now serves in a cushy posting in the tourist destination of the Gold Coast.

Lex Wotton is one of the few Palm Island residents who worked in a skilled trade, whose wages supported himself, his wife and his four children (two of whom are disabled). He is now resigned to sitting in jail for the next few years. His actions must be supported, as there is nothing more important to the people of indigenous Australia than to stand up and confront the racism that leaves them impoverished, massively disadvantaged, and to serve as punching bags for racists and cops alike.

PR Australia

How you can help:

The Lex Wotton campaign is gearing up, and has already seen worldwide demonstrations on 7 November to coincide with his sentencing. While he will not be appealing his sentence, the campaign will continue to raise awareness of black deaths in custody in Australia, and the racism that is endemic in the very fabric of the nation.

You can help by getting involved in the campaign itself by visiting "Free Lex Wotton now" group on [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/freelexwotton) and you can also email messages of support to Lex at: freelexwotton@gmail.com.

Ongoing fund raising is being organised to help support Lex's wife Cecilia and their kids through the difficult years ahead, and donations can be made to:

Melbourne University Credit Union Limited

Account name: Free Lex Wotton
cuscau2sxxx
(only if transferring from overseas)

BSB 803-143 A/C number: 13441
(all transfers)

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