

LABOUR PARTY

Going down with or without Brown

▶ AT THE start of the summer break a leadership challenge to Gordon Brown seemed very likely. Defeat by the SNP in Glasgow East, appalling opinion poll ratings following the abolition of the 10% tax band and a clear statement of intent to be a contender by David Miliband, all added up to a serious

Labour's third leader in this parliament.

For the large majority of MPs the only show in town remains Brown allied to a probably forlorn hope that things can be turned round in the next two years. However, this situation could change if things get worse.

There is an abdication of responsibility by the union leaders to deal with the question of who leads the Party which cannot be separated from policy implementation

threat to Brown.

However, even with the economic situation worsening this autumn, it now seems unlikely that there will be a challenge at least in the immediate future – despite a number of calls at the Labour Party conference. Why is this?

Firstly, because Labour MPs don't think it will make a difference to their individual electoral fortunes, the crucial determining factor for the vast majority of them when deciding their political strategy. All the polling evidence suggests that a new leader would make no difference, whoever it was. In particular, voting intentions with Miliband as leader indicate no material difference in a predicted outcome – a crushing defeat for the Labour Party at the general election!

Secondly, any decision to adopt a new leader would be likely to reduce the time needed to reverse the government's appalling ratings. That's because, with a new leader, an earlier than wanted election would have to be called. It would be very difficult to resist the clamour for a vote, given that it would be

After the completion of the conference season, Labour will face another potential disaster, in a by-election to be held in Glenrothes, a seat that shares a border with Brown's own constituency. Another defeat by the SNP could very quickly dissipate any improvement in fortunes Brown may have gained on the back of the Labour Party conference and the introduction of economic measures to offset the effects of the credit crunch. A further period of economic woes through the winter, followed by more bad election results in the Euro elections next spring could result in new attempts to replace Brown.

The manoeuvrings and machinations at the end of July help us to see who the potential contenders may be and what they represent. Chief amongst these is David Miliband. He has already made it clear that he has leadership ambitions and stands ready to act.

His politics are also clear. Unlike Blair and Brown, he has no religious conviction, but he is New Labour through and through. At the time of the 1997 election, he was head of

the policy unit in Tony Blair's office. Alistair Campbell nicknamed him "Brains" after the Thunderbirds character.

He was responsible for many of the neoliberal wheezes adopted by New Labour. He became a Labour MP in 2001 and quickly took on a series of ministerial posts. He became Minister for Schools, then Local Government, which elevated him into the cabinet. When Brown became leader he was made Foreign Secretary, partly to keep him out of the way. There he has dutifully carried out the previous agenda of warmongering and kowtowing to the US – most recently with his bellicose calls for sanctions against Russia over Georgia.

When Brown became leader there were some ultra-Blairites who wanted Miliband to stand then. He declined. He knew he couldn't win at that stage.

However it's also true that if he does make a move in the near future, he will face a number of dilemmas. In particular, outside the New Labour coterie of MPs he has little support in the party. In the unions he has no real support and has yet to build a serious base in the constituencies – but then that was the case for Blair as well.

Doubtless, in coming months, he will seek to address these problems and win more allies in the party. There have already been some judicious leaks indicating that he was critical of the Iraq war and that he told Blair to criticise Israel's attack on Lebanon.

However there has never been any public disavowal of New Labour policies. Even before he became a minister, his voting record was immaculately loyal. However, as befits his nickname, he's not stupid and will attempt to portray himself as centre/left rather than exclusively New Labour. We should expect to hear some union-friendly noises the nearer any leadership challenge gets.

That is in the future, but for now the trade union leaders are stuck with Brown. After all it was they who endorsed him for leader whilst peddling a false schema that Brown would mark a significant shift away

from Blairism. Even they realise that no such shift has transpired and so they resort once again to windy rhetoric against New Labour policies that are hammering rank and file activists, whether in pay freezes, privatisations or refusal to tax windfall profits.

Their current mantra is that policies must change, not leaders. In August, for example, Tony Woodley, Joint General Secretary of Unite, told the Observer that “with the wealth gap widening, job insecurity rife . . . and soaring fuel, energy and food prices, the Labour government desperately needed to get back to its roots and get a grip.” Fine words – except, when pressed on what the unions should do if Brown fails to act, there is no reply.

Clearly there is an abdication of responsibility by the trade union leaders to deal with the question of who leads the Labour Party which cannot be separated from policy implementation. Brown has no intention to shift away from his neoliberal policies and so must be removed and replaced.

The TUC conference in Brighton only confirmed this stance. Despite passing militant resolutions on pay, energy and trade union rights, no trade union leader was prepared to declare a fight to challenge Brown’s leadership. Indeed, Derek Simpson suggested the way forward was for Brown to adopt a more radical stance, like Obama in the US! The trade union leaders are, for all their talk, still supporting Brown in an attempt to head off a Miliband challenge in the future.

At one point, when it looked as though Miliband might launch a leadership challenge this autumn, MPs from the soft left Compass group, in conjunction with Woodley et al, started to entertain the possibility of an alternative, a so-called “dream ticket” of Alan Johnson/Jon Crudass. This idea proved stillborn when the impeccably New Labour Johnson failed to give it house room, but it does reveal the lengths to which many on the Labour “left” and within the trade union bureaucracy are prepared to go in avoiding a real challenge to New Labour: in this

case by enlisting a right winger in the cabinet just because of his previous trade union roots.

In the next period, if Brown fails to turn things round, we are likely to see more opportunist plotting and subterfuge in the government and Labour Party, such as the coordinated attempt by ex-Labour Party vice-chair Joan Ryan and others to force a contest on the eve of conference.

That’s why we welcome renewed attempts to put forward John McDonnell’s name as a principled, alternative leadership candidate. We support these moves, representing as they do, the basis for an anti-neoliberal campaign of opposition to New Labour, whether

in the form of Gordon Brown, Miliband, Johnson or whoever.

McDonnell has said that the Brownites-Blairites infighting is “like watching the crew having a punch-up on the deck of the Titanic” when in reality they have not “a single policy difference between them”, and he is absolutely right.

Certainly at the heart of any such campaign for the leadership by McDonnell must be a commitment to challenge and replace the existing trade union leaders who have been largely responsible for preventing or sabotaging any widespread action against Labour’s reactionary policies since 1997.

Andy Smith

PUBLIC SECTOR PAY

Fight against the freeze rumbles into autumn

➤ DELEGATES TO the recent annual gathering of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Brighton overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling for an escalation of resistance to the Brown government’s imposition of a de facto pay freeze across the whole of the public sector. General secretary after general secretary delivered fiery rhetoric against real pay cuts at a time of sharply rising inflation and pledged to confront the New Labour government as never before.

The composite resolution, backed by the PCS and eventually by Unison, called for industrial action coordinated between the public sector unions along with a national demonstration against the pay freeze and “days of action” under the aegis of the TUC. But, significantly, delegates on a card vote rejected an amendment from the Prison Officers Association (POA) calling for strikes to mark the days of action. Rather curiously, the voting card of the single biggest union, Unite, with a bloc vote of

some 1.5 million members, could not be found at the key moment. So Unite abstained despite its delegates supporting the POA amendment in rostrum speeches.

The more battle-hardened union activists might be swift to dismiss TUC debates as an almost irrelevant sideshow, but the arguments and votes in Brighton indicate that pressure from below is percolating to the top of the union bureaucracies. The prospect of a Tory government will not, on its own, stop sections of the movement going into struggle against Brown’s government. Whether those sections can mobilise sufficient strength to drag the most right wing and weightiest elements of the union bureaucracy into a serious confrontation with New Labour is another matter.

School’s out in November?

Days before the TUC Conference, the executive of the NUT unanimously approved a motion for a new strike ballot in opposition to

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the framework of real pay cuts imposed by the School Teachers' Review Body at the start of the year. For the first time the NUT executive has sanctioned a ballot calling for discontinuous action, which allows for the possibility of multiple one-day strikes or extended walkouts.

Having mounted a widely successful strike on 24 April, alongside sections of the PCS and the college lecturers' union (the UCU), the NUT did not rejoin the fray for the local government strike days in mid-July, called by Unison and Unite, across England and Wales. Now, however, the NUT is the potential catalyst for much wider opposition to the Brown/Darling pay freeze. The NUT ballot

starts from 6 October and closes three weeks later.

Meanwhile, the PCS, the union with the most left wing leadership of those centrally involved in the public sector pay battle, has called for ballots among some 270,000 of its members across the Civil Service. General Secretary Mark Serwotka has promised a one-day national strike of the vast majority of PCS members, followed by a rolling programme of industrial action across swathes of the PCS membership over the space of 12 weeks.

Arguably, PCS members, especially in the union's bastion of the Department of Work and Pensions, have been hardest hit by

the pay freeze that has come in tandem with a long-term package of massive job cuts and further privatisation.

The PCS ballot opens on 24 September and concludes on 17 October. This allows for the real possibility of a walkout in conjunction with the NUT on a much larger scale than seen in April.

Unison: Brown's best bulwark

Ironically, the single biggest strike thus far against the pay freeze came in mid-July and was called by Unison, with a leadership that has been the most reluctant of

LAMBETH COUNCIL

Rebuilding rank and file organisation

IT'S BEEN a busy last year at Lambeth Council in the Lambeth Unison branch. After narrowly losing the ballot to turn Lambeth Housing into an ALMO, the branch has been fighting privatisation and building the campaign to stop yet another pay cut.

The experience in the Lambeth branch has highlighted both problems in the union movement and possible ways to re-energise and radicalise the rank and file.

One of the main initiatives has been building the "Save our Services" campaign, which was launched by the housing stewards after news that the department faced yet more privatisations. It is an attempt to link up local union branches with community groups and tenants and resident associations. Several meetings have been held, including an extremely successful meeting of 130 people at the Town Hall.

The idea of linking union issues with local community issues is extremely important and the aim is to turn Save our Services into a fighting campaign against the privatisation and cut backs. If this

can be done it could be a blueprint for other local union action committees.

In the pay campaign we had a mixed picture with some workplaces getting over 90% of members out, while other offices had a poor turnout. One of the biggest problems we faced is that union organisation at the base is extremely weak, if not non-existent in many sections of the council.

The housing stewards have launched an initiative to try and turn this around and have been holding local workplace based meetings (something which hasn't happened for a long time), setting up Unison noticeboards, producing posters, leaflets and a newsletter and listening to the concerns of members, and trying to initiate active campaigns on issues such as bullying, flexi-time and stress from over work.

We have been trying to stress to members that we will only win decent pay increases and stop the management attacks once we have a strong membership that runs the branch from the bottom up. This is already producing results with more people joining Unison and

more people becoming stewards and workplace contacts.

We are hoping that other directorates will carry out similar initiatives and there has already been interest in producing newsletters for every directorate. These initiatives are extremely important in that they show Unison membership that we are a fighting union at a local level and that there are opportunities for members to get involved. It is part of rebuilding the union movement, regrouping our forces after a period of defeat.

The left has to take these tasks more seriously and realise that sloganeering and top-heavy conferences are not the way forward. Rebuilding a militant rank and file organisation will hopefully lead to a link between local branches. Then we will be able to take on the regional and national bureaucracies with genuine support from the union's membership. Until these practical steps are taken all the words in the world won't turn things around in the union, and "candidates of the left" will remain isolated.

Dan J, Lambeth

all to stage a fight and has not given much of a welcome to the prospect of coordinated action with other unions. On 16 and 17 July, Unison and Unite called out some 500,000 members across local councils in England, Wales and the north of Ireland in response to a "final" offer of just 2.45%. The GMB had already railroaded through acceptance of the sub-inflation pay deal.

Support for the two-day strike was uneven but the action was not a disaster, regardless of the claims made by the Unison local government organisation. What has happened since, however, has been little short of disastrous. Predictably, the local authority bosses offered new talks soon after the strike days with "nothing ruled in and nothing ruled out". In return the leadership of Unison and Unite suspended any further strike action for an indefinite period.

Two days of meetings in August yielded a joint statement announcing a framework for further negotiations to be concluded by December. While Unison officials refuse to confirm that there is no new money on the table from the employers, they have kept members completely in the dark over the space of nearly two months – a surefire recipe for demoralisation and disillusionment when members have not seen even a nominal pay rise since 1 April.

As August drew to a close the union's national HQ initiated a so-called consultation exercise, ostensibly to measure support for further strike action including selective walkouts by key sections of the workforce. Many activists are rightly suspicious that the consultation, has been designed to allow the Unison leadership to call a halt to the dispute.

At the same time as there is a very real danger of Unison abandoning the local government pay dispute in England and Wales, Unison, Unite and the GMB have called a further one-day strike in Scotland for 24 September over much the same issue for council workers across the 32 Scottish authorities. Perhaps the New Labour-loyal leadership prefers the

prospect of conflict with the SNP minority government at Holyrood to a showdown with New Labour at Westminster.

Unison's complete withdrawal from the fray in England and Wales would certainly be a major blow for the resistance to the pay freeze, not least because the sharp erosion of real wages for the public sector workforce over the last couple of years has created considerable bitterness, especially in the context of hefty bonuses for senior managers and the shares and salaries bonanza for many private sector bosses.

For union militants, whether in Unison or other public sector unions, there are no easy answers. Clearly, for teachers in the NUT and PCS activists the immediate priority is to secure large "yes" votes in the ballots that get underway in coming weeks, and to ensure that effective action goes ahead. The argument needs to be pressed home that while the government has shown few signs of conceding over the pay freeze, it is operating from a position of terrible weakness, and determined action over the next few months could secure real gains. The potential absence of Unison from upcoming battles cannot be allowed to paralyse the struggle

against pay cuts elsewhere.

At a local level there need to be renewed efforts to establish effective links across different unions and the public sector through Trades Councils or as local affiliates of the National Shop Stewards' Network. These bodies should serve as a means of enhancing the prospects for coordinated action in the future and ensuring that there is an element of rank and file control over disputes. They could also act to generate solidarity with other workers' struggles. In the individual unions militants need to use the struggle to rebuild effective rank and file organisations that can prevent their leaders selling out.

The experience of the past two or more years of fighting the public sector pay freeze has provided some difficult lessons, both about the ability of the union bureaucracies to undermine struggles and the weaknesses, both organisational and ideological, of fighting lefts in the unions. The need for democratically accountable leaderships and fighting rank and file groups in the unions that can transform the unions into fighting organisations is ever more urgent.

George Binette

RMT TUBE CLEANERS

Stop the deportations – justice for the cleaners!

AFTER A series of strike days over the summer, RMT tube cleaners employed by Metronet have won the right to be paid the London Living Wage. Strike days planned for July were suspended when Metronet, who are responsible for the majority of the network, agreed to give cleaning staff £7.40 an hour from this September.

This represents a significant victory for some of the most exploited workers in London, but

the fight is far from over [see box overleaf]. In a wilful act of revenge and retribution, the cleaning companies, in close collaboration with the immigration authorities, have launched a witch-hunt against the cleaners, through the use of immigration checks, sackings and deportations.

The strikes have shown the strengths and weaknesses of the RMT. The idea of industrial trade unionism, workers of all grades fighting together, has given

confidence to cleaners who are often scattered across the tube and who would by themselves find it difficult to shut the network down. RMT activists have been key in making links with the cleaners, building support in depots and using the strikes to build the union.

Out of this struggle a new layer of rank and file reps have emerged, some of whom have shown enormous courage in taking on the bosses, but not without casualties. ISS, one of the leading cleaning companies, sacked the rep at Stonebridge depot during the strike, using his immigration status as an excuse.

Direct action organised by the umbrella group Justice4tubecleaners, who held up a train for 10 minutes at Stonebridge, demanding his immediate reinstatement, raised the need for solidarity from RMT workers at the depot. A walkout by the RMT branch at Stonebridge is the least the union should be fighting for.

The RMT urgently needs to turn its attention to the current wave of intimidation and attacks being carried out by companies like ISS, Initial and GBM.

Many of the cleaners are forced

to work without papers. Of course this suits the bosses as they can exploit workers' fears to pay poverty wages. As a result of cleaners standing up for their rights these unscrupulous companies have suddenly "discovered" that their workers may not have work permits.

Already two cleaners working for GBM have been deported back to Nigeria, and currently one other worker is being held in detention. ISS has written letters demanding that cleaners bring in their National Insurance numbers, and it has been reported that Initial are carrying out their own immigration "checks". This goes hand in hand with a government crackdown on employers and a new tightening of work permit controls based on the "points system".

The RMT should be mobilising the full weight of the union to demand an end to all victimisations, demanding the immediate issue of work permits to all those cleaners currently working on the tube and full citizenship rights to those who want it.

A tall order you might think, but the very minimum that any trade union that talks about workers'

solidarity should be fighting for.

The network of activists who have organised around Justice4tubecleaners intends to keep the pressure on. Successful pickets and occupations of the offices of ISS, GBM, Transport for London and Mayor's question time have given the cleaners' struggle for justice and dignity some excellent publicity.

This network, as with the Justice for Cleaners campaign in Canary Wharf, shows the importance of linking trade union action with direct action against these companies organised by supporters and other trade unionists less vulnerable to victimisation by the employers and state.

Activists will be attending Boris Johnson's question time in October to demand the Greater London Assembly support the rights of cleaners to a living wage and life free from harassment and persecution.

Kirstie Paton

Join the protest
For more details mail:
[justice4tubecleaners@
googlemail.com](mailto:justice4tubecleaners@googlemail.com)

or ring Robin on: 07947 331053

TUBE LINES DISPUTE

Tube Lines cleaners fail to get living wage

▶ WHILE METRONET, who run the majority of the tube network, agreed to the living wage. Tube Lines, who run the Northern, Piccadilly and Jubilee lines, refused and instead offered cleaners an increase of 60p an hour with the promise of a living wage next April.

Whether they actually get it or not is another matter. Amongst some of the RMT reps there is a concern that the RMT Executive suspended the action prematurely. Why did they call off the strike when cleaners employed by Tube Lines were offered an insulting

60p with no guarantee of the living wage?

Originally the strikes planned for August were to coincide with engineers in dispute with Tube Lines over pay and other similar issues. Wouldn't it have made sense that the engineers and cleaners, both members of the same union, working for the same employer, agree in advance that they would refuse to call off their strike until an agreement had been reached that met the demands of both groups of workers?

Instead the engineers accepted

an offer by Tube Lines and agreed to call off the strikes before they had a chance to speak to the cleaners who were negotiating in the same building! This left the cleaners out on a limb and in a much weaker position to take on the bosses.

The question of rank and file control is paramount. Decisions about when to call off action should be voted on by all those cleaners on strike. The strike committee must be accountable to the strikers, not the union bureaucrats.

A London tubeworker

Debating policies for the campaign

FEMINIST FIGHTBACK held a policy meeting in August. Around 20 women activists gathered to discuss what sort of demands a feminist socialist movement should be fighting for today. The organisation was formed as an activist network drawing together people who had attended two successful Feminist Fightback Conferences in 2006 and 2007.

“We’re inspired by the politics of socialist feminism – the idea that women’s liberation and the establishment of a democratic, classless society are interlinked – but we seek to involve socialist and feminists of different viewpoints in discussing ideas and building an activist movement”, explains the website.

Permanent Revolution members attended both conferences and have been supporting Feminist Fightback activities such as the campaign to defend abortion rights and solidarity in support of the Tube cleaners.

The policy meeting took as its starting point the demands of the Women’s Liberation Movement agreed 30 years ago at the last WLM conference in Birmingham [See box, top right].

These demands are still relevant today, although thirty years later they all provoke discussion as to what each concretely would mean to fight for and implement now. The demand for “free 24-hour community controlled childcare” led to a discussion over what kind of childcare women want, and by whom, and how it should be delivered. Some women at the meeting felt that if parents desire it, they should be able to look after their children at home with the requisite state support in the form of benefits at average wage level, and/or part time work with good pay and conditions. Others argued

that free nurseries didn’t have to mean Stalinist era soulless, understaffed, poor quality, childcare and that childcare workers should be much better paid and their skills valued.

Taking the demands as a starting point certainly made for an interesting afternoon’s debate but in retrospect it meant that we didn’t have a full discussion about the roots of women’s oppression itself. Feminist Fightback is a coalition of different groups and individuals, some coming from an academic research background, some like ourselves and the Alliance for Worker’s Liberty comrades with a Marxist perspective, others representing the various campaigns based at the Crossroads Women’s Centre and some coming from an anti-capitalist direct action tradition.

There will be differences in our views as to the origins of, and the way to bring an end to, women’s oppression. These differences did come up from time to time – for example, does Feminist Fightback want to be an organisation that raises money through grant applications and pays people to take anti-sexist education sessions into schools? Or should Feminist Fightback be more of an activist organisation with an emphasis on solidarity with the organised working class?

As there had been no time allocated to the central question of what women’s oppression is and how the struggle against it is linked to the struggle against capitalism and its state, these issues were left unresolved. However, they will not simply go away, and more open debate about our differences would help to clarify what and how much common ground there is.

Having looked at the seven original demands, it was agreed to

In 1978 the movement declared, “The women’s liberation movement asserts a woman’s right to define her own sexuality, and demands:

- › Equal pay for equal work
- › Equal education and job opportunities
- › Free contraception
- › Free 24-hour community-controlled childcare
- › Legal and financial independence for women
- › An end to discrimination against lesbians
- › Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of male violence. An end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and men’s aggression towards women”.

focus on ten areas: childcare, immigration controls, workers’ rights, public/social services, education, violence against women, women’s health, reproductive freedom, discrimination, international solidarity and anti-imperialism, a democratic,

Media Workers Against the War Conference

Under Siege: Islam, war and the media

2.00-6.30pm Saturday 15 November
London School of Economics

Speakers agreed so far

Moazzam Begg – writer and former Guantanamo inmate
Lauren Booth – Mail on Sunday journalist and Palestine campaigner
Inayat Bunglawala – Muslim Council of Britain
Nick Davies – author, Flat Earth News
Jeremy Dear – General Secretary, NUJ
Eamonn McCann – Irish journalist and writer
Explo Nani-Kofi – Editor, Kilombo, a Pan-African journal
Peter Osborne – Daily Mail columnist, former Editor of the Spectator

Tickets

Full price: £15 Students/concessions: £10
To pre-book email info@mwaw.net or pay online using PayPal

accountable rank and file women's movement, and freedom of sexual expression.

Since I work for a domestic abuse support service I volunteered to draft some current demands on the issue of violence against women. The problem I found was one of where do you stop? It's the classic problem of campaigns that focus on one part of society – when you start to think about what needs to change for women not to live in fear in their homes, or to be safe on the streets, you quickly start getting into demands around education, social housing, the benefits system, and more – the hugely complicated question of the legal system and “justice” in the bourgeois courts! Every issue you look at leads out into demands for the wider working class as a whole.

The absolutely key demand is actually around organisation, expressed above in terms of “a democratic, accountable rank and file women's movement”. If such a movement could be built, with strong links to the rest of the labour movement, it would be able

to react to challenges as they came along as well as fighting proactively for an end to women's oppression. It could also help to revitalise the weakened labour movement as a whole.

We're a long way from there at the moment, but at least Feminist Fightback has an orientation to working women's struggles and wants to continue to make those links. It's crucial that it does for the campaign to become more than just another pressure group.

We will be discussing these issues over the next few months in the run up to the next Feminist

Fightback conference, and welcome any contributions for the magazine or on the website.

Work this autumn is going to begin with a focus on supporting Diane Abbott's amendment to the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Bill which, if passed, would extend the right to abortion to Northern Ireland.

Bigger campaigns such as Abortion Rights are apparently not going to take this up and Sinn Fein and the DUP are both against it! Work will also continue to build a third conference early next year.

Alison Higgins

CLIMATE CHANGE

What future is there for the coal industry?

THIS YEAR'S Climate Camp was held on a hill in Kent, giving us a wonderful view of

the Kingsnorth power station. The site was chosen to highlight the disastrous direction that the

STATEMENT FOR THE FEBRUARY 2009 FEMINIST FIGHTBACK CONFERENCE

“We are feminists who have come together from a number of groups to organise an event on Saturday 14 February 2009. We are excited and energised by the current resurgence in feminist activism in the UK, but we think that the kind of feminist movement we build and the kind of politics it has, matter.

We are committed to an anti-capitalist feminism which sees the interconnections between all struggles against oppressions and against capitalism, and we want to build an event that creates an open space to discuss this and develop our ideas.

But we don't want to just talk about our politics – we want to fight to actually change the material conditions of women's lives, to fight misogyny and our own exploitation, and to involve as many women and men as

possible in the campaigns that will be at the centre of this event.

We want the joint event to provide us with a forum to come together, participate in open debate, develop strategies to work towards our common aims, network, make alliances and inspire each other to build a strong and active feminist movement. We need to unite to challenge women's oppression and exploitation. We want to fight for the rights of all women – and that includes the rights of sex workers and “illegal” migrants.

We organise using non-hierarchical, consensus-based decision making. We recognise the power structures that exist among us, based on the inequalities of our society, which amplify some voices and marginalise others, and we will actively work to confront them. Decisions are taken at

monthly meetings, which are open to feminists of all genders. There's also the option to work autonomously in self-defined groups (e.g. women-only). We respect the fact that women have a diversity of experience and we see this as positive in that it enables us to learn from each other.

Key issues on which we want to organise include:

- › Defending and extending reproductive freedom.
- › Opposing rape and sexual abuse.
- › Fighting racism and immigration controls.
- › Building solidarity between women workers.
- › Challenging all forms of heterosexism and increasing our freedom of sexual expression.
- › Struggles against capitalist exploitation.

www.feministfightback.org.uk”

National Climate March

Part of the Global Day of Climate Protest

London Saturday 6 December

See: www.campaigncc.org for details

government's energy policies are taking the UK.

E.ON's proposal to build a new coal-fired power station at Kingsnorth is the first such application for decades, but if successful will not be the last – at least five more are on hold pending the outcome. E.ON, backed in cabinet by business minister John Hutton and energy minister Malcolm Wicks, argues that the protest is unfounded since the new power station heralds a new age in clean coal which will become part of the solution rather than exacerbating the problem of climate change.

At the Climate Camp Dave Douglass, retired NUM official and NUM leader Arthur Scargill's right hand man, could be seen each day handing out copies of a special issue of *The Miner* making the case for expanding the UK coal industry. A well-attended debate took place at the camp, with Arthur Scargill arguing that "Britain needs an integrated energy policy that will produce 250m tonnes of indigenous deep-mine clean coal per year." He believes that all existing and new coal-fired stations can be fitted with clean coal technology that would "remove all CO₂".

But is he right? Will the climate change challenge actually lead to a revival for coal and reverse the 170,000 job losses and the closure of 192 pits seen since 1980? Is there a bright future for clean coal?

A month after the camp, a jury in Maidstone Crown Court came down squarely on the side of the anti-coal environmental campaigners. In October 2007, six Greenpeace protesters had scaled the tower at Kingsnorth and painted GORDON on the side. At the trial they were cleared of causing £35,000 worth of criminal damage, even though they admitted carrying out the action.

Their defence, accepted by the jury, was that they had "lawful excuse" since they were actually acting to protect property around the world that was in immediate need of protection from the impacts of climate change, caused in part by burning coal.

It was a remarkable decision. The

jury heard from leading climate change scientist Jim Hansen, who convinced them that the maximum safe level of CO₂ had already been reached, and that if we carry on as we are sea levels will rise at least two metres this century and one million species will be pushed into extinction (including 400 by

Key arguments on climate change appear to have been largely won, namely that the climate is changing and that this is primarily a man-made problem

Kingsnorth's CO₂ emissions alone).

He concluded that: "construction of new coal-fired power plants makes it unrealistic to hope for the prompt phase-out of coal emissions and thus makes it practically impossible to avert climate disasters for today's young people and future generations."

A second expert, Dr Geoff Meaden from Canterbury University, brought the argument closer to home for the Kent-based citizens of the jury. He explained that Kingsnorth power station itself would be "extremely vulnerable" to flooding through climate change, and that things were "so urgent that unless we act immediately to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, by the next century we may have to abandon up to 20% of Kent to the sea."

Key arguments on climate change appear to have been largely won, namely that the climate is changing, that this is due to the rising levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and that this is primarily a man-made problem. But the debate about what we do about it is only just really beginning, despite the urgency. This argument over coal, just like those over nuclear power and biofuels, is not as straightforward as some advocates, on both sides, would have us believe.

Scargill, E.ON and the government are all convinced that carbon capture and storage (CCS)

technology means that we can have our coal and burn it. Unfortunately, CCS is not that simple. Although some CCS is currently in use for oil and gas, it is not directly applicable to coal, and the optimism of governments and the EU, who concluded that "the possibility exists for a CO₂-free energy system

based on fossil fuels", is misplaced.

A German expert, Peter Viebahn of the German Aerospace Centre Institute of Technical Thermodynamics, carried out a systems analysis of CCS – looking at the overall impact, and concluded that "it is not justified to talk about 'CO₂-free' power plants or 'clean coal' concepts if only 70-80% global warming potential reductions are possible; electricity produced from renewables causes much lower CO₂ emissions and greenhouse gas emissions than CCS, and currently CO₂ storage can not be guaranteed for a long time – CCS shifts risks to future generations which requires safe and reliable monitoring." The *Future of Coal*, a report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology last year, predicted that CCS wouldn't be in place for commercial use for another 20 years.

Also the preferred option for capturing carbon – in flues as the coal burned, then liquified, transported and stored – would cause more CO₂ emitting traffic than the present oil industry. While other less polluting options exist they are more expensive and hence not attractive to the private energy companies.

So to base an energy plan on the expansion of coal will increase CO₂ emissions in the short run and there is no guarantee that CCS will reduce it later. This is why we should oppose the expansion of coal

and call for a moratorium on new plants, while supporting a major expansion of research into CCS.

Of course, the energy companies will not invest in the research unless they can start making money from coal now. That's why we need to have government funded investment in this kind of

research, paid for not just through a windfall tax on the energy companies but through their nationalisation.

without increasing CO₂ to the point where disastrous, irreversible climate change results? Renewable sources such as solar and wind power are not enough. It is therefore essential that other sources are thoroughly explored, including nuclear, carbon capture and storage and newer sources like

CCS, nuclear and new bio-energy must be explored and researched.

To ensure that this process does not further entrench inequalities it needs to be done in a framework of contraction and convergence. Once a safe limit of CO₂ emissions is agreed then big polluters like the US and UK must come down to that level, while allowing those, usually poor countries below it, to produce more.

But once again, the market will not be able to deliver this in an equitable way. Such a plan needs state direction, mobilising the mighty resources of many economies; it also needs the democratic input and creativity of masses of people to conserve energy. In fact it needs everything that runs completely counter to neoliberal free market capitalism espoused by Gordon Brown and his fellow G8 governments.

The urgency of a revolutionary change in the way we plan and run society has never been greater. There is a growing scientific consensus that eight years from now if we have not pushed emissions down to a safe limit then the feedback loops in place, whereby one aspect of global warming produces even more, will ensure that no matter what we do after that time we will not be able to avert a worldwide disaster of runaway climate change this century. That is just how much is at stake.

Helen Ward

More energy is needed to improve the living conditions of the two billion people who live in absolute poverty. So we need efficiency, redistribution and expansion

research, paid for not just through a windfall tax on the energy companies but through their nationalisation.

If the US government can carry out the biggest ever nationalisation in history to avert the meltdown of the financial system then it is surely reasonable to nationalise the energy industries to save the planet from meltdown. If the shareholders of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac can be left holding worthless paper due to the mess they made of their business then we can take the same stance with the power monopolies.

But if we are opposed to the expansion of coal, and opposed to the expansion of nuclear, opposed to biofuels, then how are we to ensure that there is enough energy?

Can we reduce the amount of energy used? In a country like the UK the answer is almost certainly yes: through a programme of improved energy efficiency, ending wasteful consumption we could still meet the essential energy needs of all.

But at a global level it is not the case. There is massive inequality in energy use between rich and poor, and like it or not, more energy is needed to improve the living conditions of the two billion people of the world who live in absolute poverty. So we need efficiency, redistribution and expansion.

So how can there be a global expansion in energy production


solar energy and second generation bio-fuels.

Bio-fuels have certainly been a disaster so far, but there are other potential methods that need investment and exploration, such as genetically engineered bacteria that could make ethanol efficiently from waste products of farming and forestry, a sort of oil produced through photosynthesis in algae, or "mining" the heat of the earth's core.

In the short term an emergency global plan needs to start with a massive investment in those things that are proven to be effective, safe and clean, namely energy efficiency and renewables, shifts in the way we produce and use energy, food and transport. At the same time the other options, including coal with

CHILE

Chilean workers change the political map

 TWO AND half years ago Michelle Bachelet won the presidential elections and promised to change Chile for the better. Many people embraced her, both for her novelty (the first elected woman president in Latin America) and for the fact that at

the same time she reminded people of a better past.

She was the daughter of a loyalist Air Force General who served under deposed Socialist President Allende and who was tortured to death by the dictatorship. She herself served

time in one of Pinochet's jails.

People were hopeful, optimistic even. She said her new government would break with the crude neoliberalism of the previous governments but without following the populist path of Morales and Chavez to the north.

Rather, policies "promoting economic growth and stability" must continue, but they should be complemented with measures designed to promote greater equality among Chileans through social and labour policies directed at the poorest sectors of society.

Above all, Bachelet promised a new style of "participatory government", divorced from the businessmen, military chiefs and priests who had long wielded de facto power in Chile. Her government would be "closer to the citizens" who had chosen her as their president.

Nothing of the sort has happened. President Bachelet has made only cosmetic changes in social, educational, economic and labour policies and she has remained firmly within the framework of the free-market model inherited from the military. Why?

She may have illustrious ancestors but she was a leader of the Socialist Party of Chile, which like sister bourgeois workers' parties in Europe, was happy to embrace neoliberal policies and globalisation. She may have tasted Pinochet's repressive whip when young, but Bachelet spent a year at Fort McNair in the US, where she took a course in "internal war" doctrine and counter-insurgency strategies.

Unlike her father who started out with the intention of radical reform even if it meant confronting US power, Bachelet followed, in her own words, a path of "convergence with the hegemonic power".

Before she became president, Bachelet served as Minister of Health for two years, overseeing no improvements in the decaying public health system, taking no significant measures for the 50% of the Chilean population who could

not afford private health insurance, and making no effort to improve the failed private pension system, once declared by Washington as the "model" for the world.

During Bachelet's time as Defence Minister, Chile's military spending reached new heights: per capita military spending easily exceeded that of every government in Latin America. By spending billions of dollars on a new fleet of fighter planes, helicopters, warships and a satellite spy system, Chile aimed at "converging" with the US in policing the turbulent Andean countries.

Bachelet was the US's most vocal supporter of sending a military expeditionary force to Haiti to relieve US military forces after they ousted President Aristide. Over 400 heavily armed Chilean soldiers patrolled the slum streets of Port-au-Prince in support of the US imposed puppet regime, and later as president she renewed her commitment to remain in Haiti. Bachelet has welcomed every chance to engage in military exercises with the US.

All the post-Pinochet "Concertación" governments since 1990 have maintained continuity with the state model inherited from the military regime, a model

During the period of transition from Pinochet in the early 1990s, the Chilean popular movement demobilised and moderated its goals and strategies

which meant subordinating social programmes to the imperatives of the market. These Concertación governments have been incapable of countering the widening chasm between rich and poor that the neoliberal economic model itself generates.

In this model, the state assumes responsibility for ensuring the subsistence of the poorest by providing them with some subsidies, but it renounces one of

the principal social functions of any decent socialist government, of eradicating or, at least, massively reducing poverty and inequality.

During the period of transition from Pinochet in the early 1990s, the Chilean popular movement demobilised and moderated its goals and strategies. The most important factors contributing to this process were the fear of a "return to 1973" and a military dictatorship.

There was a powerful urge towards reconciliation and the creation of a stable political order, and above all a desire to avoid a repetition of the events that led to the 1973 coup, an outlook that was instilled by the reformist leaders of the Concertación.

On coming to power, Bachelet gave the post of Minister of Economics to Andres Velasco, very well known for his links with US companies and entrepreneurs and the founder and leader of neoliberal think tank, Expansiva. She appointed Andres Zaldívar, one of the men who plotted Allende's fall, to the Ministry of the Interior.

Her government has continued to spend lavishly on the armed forces. She has boosted the personnel and equipment available to the police to repress the

struggles of workers, students and the Mapuche people. The turning point in popular feeling against the Bachelet government was when more than 600,000 secondary school students occupied their schools – the "Penguin" uprising of April-June 2006.

With this mobilisation, the political map of Chile changed. A new generation, the "sons of democracy" as they called themselves, came onto the political

scene. At first lulled by promises, they have grown cynical of the Concertación's actions. No longer content with the odd concession, they attack the fundamental principles of neoliberal policies, and the invasion of education by profit-making businesses.

Following the example of the

More than the half of Chilean workers are working part-time, casual and often at weekends to make ends meet; to escape collective bargaining, companies have outsourced work to subcontractors or created phantom companies. People working alongside one another can find

copper industry have been on almost permanent mobilisation and strikes over the last two years.

The timber workers from Arauco, the miners, the agricultural and food processing workers, the bus drivers, the fishermen, teachers, civil servants, local government and health workers, bank employees, the Mapuche struggling to recuperate their ancestral lands that have been fraudulently seized from them – these are just some of those taking direct action in the last two years.

The uprising of the students, the reviving of the workers' movement and the effects of oil and food price rises on the popular mood, have brought tensions within and between the government parties to a head.

Today for the first time, Chile's powerful political coalition, Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia (Concertación), will submit two separate lists of candidates for the upcoming municipal elections to be held in October.

This decision follows an effort by Bachelet, along with former Presidents Patricio Aylwin, Ricardo Lagos, and Eduardo Frei, failed to convince two of the Concertación's main parties – the Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD) and the

Neoliberal ideology has become so pervasive, even among part of the left, that major reforms to the free-market model are automatically rejected

students, increasing numbers of people in Chile are getting fed up with Bachelet. Life has not improved for the mass of workers and their families. Casual labour, mounting personal debt, low wages and now, rising inflation are making people angry.

Pro-big business commentators speak at length about economic growth while keeping quiet about environmental destruction, the growing gap between rich and poor (the top 20% of income earners control 60% of Chilean GDP), and the worsening quality of public services, education, healthcare and housing.

themselves technically employed by a different company. And of course, the Chilean labour code prohibits collective negotiations over working conditions relating to the workers of two or more different companies.

In these circumstances, having joint trade union negotiations or action by workers employed by a subcontractor is practically illegal. This leads to the situation where work colleagues employed by a subcontractor earn less and work in worse conditions than workers employed by the parent company. This is the reason why the subcontracted workers in the

HANDS OFF THE PEOPLE OF IRAN

Defend Iranian students!

IN EARLY September Anooshe Azadbar was brought before a court in Iran and charged with "plotting against the regime" and other offences. Anooshe is a student at Tehran University, and was recently elected Honorary Vice President of the National Union of Students in Britain.

Anooshe was one of many students arrested for peacefully demonstrating on National Students Day on 4 December 2007 against the threat of war against Iran and against the regimes

repression of students. Anousha, along with other students, now faces the threat of imprisonment.

The regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is in trouble with the Iranian electorate as the economic situation goes from bad to worse, despite the increase in oil prices of the last period. As a result Ahmadinejad is hitting out at any source of opposition.

Four women's rights campaigners have recently been jailed for six months for organising a One Million

Signature campaign for equal rights for women in Iran.

Hands Off the People of Iran is campaigning against these attacks on students and women in Iran at the same time as campaigning against any attacks on Iran being planned by the US or Israel.

A model resolution to defend the students, already passed by Liverpool Trades Union Council, can be found on our website at: www.permanentrevolution.net/entry/2293

Further details about the repression and about HOPI events can be found on the campaign's website: www.hopoi.org

Partido por la Democracia (PPD), to maintain a unified list.

Hit with allegations of corruption and mismanagement of public funds, the Concertación – which has won every presidential election following Chile's return to democracy in 1990 – appears to be at its weakest in two decades.

Chile's incomparable recent economic performance, based as it is on labour flexibility and low wages, has produced an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" complacency among most of Chile's political leaders. But now the workers and students rightly demand that the huge revenues pouring in from agriculture, timber, fish, wine, meat, poultry and mineral exports, should be invested in education, housing, health and social services.

But the government decides to invest the profits in US Treasury Bonds to keep US interest rates (and hence the US dollar) as high as possible. This keeps the value of the Chilean peso as low as possible and thus provides a massive boost to Chilean exports.

With such a recipe, it is unclear where Bachelet's proposed "Growth with Equity" is supposed to come from. As one Socialist Party economist recently put it:

"The intellectual who proposes redistributive policies is treated as if he were antiquated and obsessed, proposing policies that failed in the past. The idea now is we have to privatise everything, we have to stimulate private enterprise, and hopefully we will all be entrepreneurs!"

Neoliberal ideology has become so pervasive, even among part of the left, that major reforms to the free-market model are automatically rejected as "populist" and inflationary.

The mobilisations of the last two years show very clearly that a new generation is emerging that is not scarred by the historic defeat of 1973 when the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende was bloodily overthrown. Today the workers, the youth, the women – all are on the move and rebuilding the trade union and

workers' organisations.

They are increasingly turning their back on the establishment parties and expressing distrust in the reformist political parties. As proof of this, 68% of people aged between 18 and 24-year-olds have refused even to sign up to the electoral register.

New perspectives have opened up. The last two years showed the potential for the building of militant, independent rank and

file trade union tendencies, and for the construction of a new Marxist workers' party with a socialist revolutionary programme. The labour movement and the poor people are learning in struggle that there are collective solutions based on the power from below that can and will put an end to the misery brought about by this neoliberal regime.

Diego Carmoní
Revolución Proletaria, Chile

BOLIVIA

Right wing plots coup against Evo Morales

IN EARLY September protestors from the so-called "civic movements" of the east of Bolivia launched violent attacks on government buildings. The offices of the state-run telecommunications company, the tax agency, the land reform institute and the local branch of the state television network in the city of Santa Cruz were raided, trashed and burned. Many of these attacks have been led by local government leaders with the support of the local governors.

There were also attacks on workers and peasant organisations. The Executive Secretary of the Departmental Workers' Union had his home burnt down, and indigenous rights groups and NGOs had their offices looted and set on fire.

Workers in a predominately pro-government quarter of Santa Cruz had to organise their own defence to fight off an attack by 400 armed right wingers on their local market.

Further unrest was reported in the other three provinces of the Media Luna, the eastern part of Bolivia, so named because it looks like a half-moon. Pro-government demonstrations were attacked and an attempt was made to storm and occupy a gas installation plant,

damaging a vital gas supply pipe to Brazil.

Reports suggest that several people have been killed and many injured in these attacks. Many supporters of President Evo Morales and his party, the Movement towards Socialism (MAS), have gone into hiding.

These provinces have witnessed the growth of a secessionist movement led by the racist elite and rich landowners. The leaders of this civic movement are demanding increased autonomy and a guarantee of more of the profits from the oil and gas revenues of the country. The central government has promised to use gas and oil income to alleviate poverty and modernise the country.

The protestors who stormed the government buildings were well organised and included armed fascist thugs of the Cruzeño Youth Union (UJC). They clashed with both the police and army. The Interior Minister Alfredo Rada said the attacks amounted to "a civic coup" and blamed the governor of Santa Cruz, Ruben Costas, and civic movement leader, Branko Marinkovic, for planning and carrying out the attacks.

This escalation of actions against the government has been led by the National Democratic Council

(Consejo Nacional Democrático – Conalde), and they have some very powerful allies. Morales has just expelled the US ambassador as a result of a series of meetings he held with these Conalde leaders in late August, shortly before the organised attacks. It seems this is a deliberate attempt by Washington

organisations of the Conalde.

Relying on Morales or the Bolivian state to do this would be foolish. While a few army and police officials might be loyal to the government, the majority of them are linked to the ruling class of Bolivia and the US military by a thousand ties.

literally, march on the Media Luna, and support their allies in the area to destroy the Conalde and the fascists of the UJC.

Efforts also need to be made to organise the rank and file soldiers within the army so they will be ready and willing to mutiny and side with the people if there is a coup attempt.

But even if the Conalde are defeated, the ruling class will still attempt to regroup and reorganise another violent opposition movement opposed to the aspirations of the majority of the Bolivian people.

The aim must be, not only to defeat the Conalde, but to finally take the wealth and power from the hands of the ruling class. This means the organisations of the workers and peasants must press forward with their demands from the uprisings of 2003 and 2005 – for the expropriation of major industries and natural resources, the confiscation of land and its redistribution, and for political power to reside in the hands of the indigenous, peasant and working class masses.

Dave Esterson

Efforts need to be made to organise the rank and file soldiers within the army so they will be ready and willing to mutiny and side with the people if there is a coup

to either bring down Morales, engineer a coup or, failing that, break up the country.

All of this follows a resounding success for Morales in a presidential recall referendum on 10 August. He won 67% of the vote, higher than his original vote when he won the presidency in 2005. Even in the heartland of the reactionary civic movement, Santa Cruz, Morales was able to secure 40% of the vote. In addition recall referendums defeated the right wing governor of Cochabamba, Manfred Reyes Villa, along with governor of La Paz, Jose Luis Paredes.

The response of the Morales government has been one of conciliation in the face of organised violence by the right. This policy is clearly not working: every show of weakness is followed by an offensive by Conalde, who are showing their contempt for the “democratic victory” of the president. Morales has refused to mobilise either the Bolivian state, the army or police or his own supporters in the MAS to deal with these attacks. Meanwhile, indigenous, peasant and workers’ organisations remain isolated and face a highly organised and well-resourced enemy.

The working class, peasants and indigenous movements need to respond to these attacks and assist the resistance of their brothers and sisters in the Media Luna. Their aim must be to crush the reactionary

The most crucial step at the moment is for the mass organisations of the working class and peasants to organise self-defence. Organisations like the trade union federation, the COB, should demand that Morales arms them and gives them the resources they need. A united front of all the mass organisations should be organised to confront the Conalde leaders. An army of the working class and the oppressed could then,

IRELAND

The shining light dims, the Celtic tiger chokes

IN 1997 the Economist magazine announced that Ireland was “The Celtic Tiger: Europe’s shining light”. They were referring to a period of exceptionally fast growth through the 1990s, when the Irish economy was transformed from Britain’s poor relation, into Europe’s fastest growing economy.

An influx of multinational corporations, taking advantage of exceptionally low corporate tax rates of around 10% (compared to 35% in the UK, 40% in France and 60% in Germany), and huge transfer payments from the EU of around 4%

of GNP, led to a boom in industry.

Unemployment tumbled from 16% in 1993 to 5.5% in 1999, public debt as a proportion of GDP fell from 91% in 1993 to 39% in 1999 and emigration, the bane of Ireland, halted and even some immigration began.

After a pause following the bursting of the hi-tech bubble from 2003-04, growth resumed its strong upward path, and a construction and infrastructure boom developed, reaching 12% of GDP, compared to a peak of 6% in the US and 4.5% in the UK.

But that was then. The bursting

of the US property bubble in August 2007 and subsequent credit crunch has hit the Irish hard. Today the Economist tells a rather different story. In July the government cut its forecast for 2008 economic growth to just 0.5% from 2.8% at the time of the 2008 budget.

The virtual evaporation of economic growth this year is expected to cause tax revenues to fall short of budget targets by €5bn during 2008. (In the first six months of 2008 three areas, VAT, capital gains tax and stamp duties, accounted for 82% of total tax shortfall.) This statistic indicates both the steep decline in housing markets and slower consumer spending.

The steep decline in tax receipts this year will cause the government's overall budget deficit to swell to 3.3% of GDP compared to an anticipated 0.9%, breaching the 3% limit imposed by the European Growth and Stability Pact, which stipulated that deficits should be below 3% of GDP over the economic cycle. The current shortfall in tax revenue means that government borrowing to meet existing commitments would exceed that limit. Inevitably, therefore, those commitments will be trashed.

Building and construction has collapsed, subtracting 4% from GDP growth alone. Activity in the building sector fell by one-fifth in the first three months of the year. The main component in the reduced output was a 38% drop in residential house building, which was only marginally offset by a 9% increase in non-residential construction. Industrial production also registered a decline of 0.9% between the first quarter of 2007 and 2008. Industry including construction makes up almost one-third of GDP.

Last year the construction industry generated about €37bn, close to one-quarter of all wealth created in the Republic in 2007. The estimate of the number of new houses to be built this year is about 46,000 – about half the record 88,000 homes built in 2006. In comparison NHBC figures show that there were 186,505 new homes

completed by NHBC registered builders in the UK in 2007, 1% higher than in 2006 (184,959).

In 2006 Ireland completed half the number of homes built in the UK, but with a population 15 times smaller. Growth in mortgage lending is now below 10% – the lowest since 1989. The expectation is that property values will fall 25-45% from their peak.

The destruction of jobs and incomes in the construction sector and the erosion of confidence it has engendered is now affecting consumer spending, which is on the slide. Retail sales volumes in August 2008 were 5.2% lower than a year earlier, the biggest annual fall since 1987.

There has been a massive drop in the value of the four Irish-listed quoted banks. AIB, BOI, Anglo Irish and Irish Life and Permanent have shed two-thirds of their value since their share prices peaked 18 months ago. Despite this the banks have continued to report strong profits, although international investors believe the Irish economic downturn and property slump will hit them hard, pushing up bad debts.

The picture in industry is not so bleak. While there was a 3.3% drop in output in the manufacturing sector in the second quarter of this year, on an annual basis production

over a year earlier, mainly driven upwards by the surge in global raw materials prices, particularly for energy and food. Accelerating job losses in industry and services has seen the unemployment rate rise to 6.1% in August, its highest rate in a decade, (although still below the EU average of 7%).

The government, alarmed by the rapid deterioration, has made an unprecedented move to bring forward the budget by seven weeks (to 14 October). Public finances have deteriorated sharply from a surplus in 2006 to deficit now. The public finance deficit tripled in the first eight months of 2008.

In July Brian Lenihan, the Fianna Fáil Minister for Finance, ruled out any large scale borrowing to deal with the shortfall in tax revenue. He planned to save €440m this year and a further €1bn next year, mainly from cutting the public service payroll bill by 3%, laying-off 5,000 public servants, part-time and temporary workers. The proposals contained in the proposed budget will not come into effect until the start of 2009.

In September the government will restart negotiations with the unions and business representatives on a new three-year national wage deal, the employers' body IBEC is pushing for a 12-month pay freeze, and an inability to pay clause. The

Irish exports are broadly flat, reflecting the impact of slower growth in Ireland's major foreign customers and the damaging rise in the value of the euro

in the manufacturing sector was up 6.6% to the end of June, mainly spurred by increased output in the chemicals sector. Irish exports are broadly flat, reflecting the impact of slower growth in Ireland's major foreign customers and the damaging rise in the value of the euro against sterling and the dollar.

The difficult situation for workers is compounded by the rise in the cost of living to 4.7% in May

talks broke down in August. They want their so-called "social partners", especially the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), to deliver a tightening of belts for their members. It is the beginning of massive cuts and austerity measures. They aim to break the linkage of pay increases to inflation and deliver wage cuts.

It is worth remembering that the current leader of ICTU, David Begg,

pioneered the introduction of the so-called social partnership process in 1987 with the Programme for National Recovery when industrial peace was traded for promises which were rarely kept.

Sacrifices were to be made by workers in wage restraint and productivity increases so that they would be rewarded in better times – at some time in the future. For over 20 years, they utter the same formula: bread today and jam tomorrow. Nowadays it appears that jam is still too expensive and the slice of bread too large.

Working people face the pressures of rising energy and food costs, house repossessions, unemployment and the threatened privatisation of the parts of the health service (at a time when over 50% of them fork out for private health insurance).

Yet, those who benefited most from the 10-year boom will not bear the burden. For example, the proposed co-location of private hospitals on public grounds will make a profit for the investors because they will be shielded by tax breaks and tax shelters. The construction industry is demanding the state provide incentives for buying their massively over-valued houses: all such incentives to be paid for by the tax-payer. Of course this will be branded as a major concession, permitting the least well off in society to buy a home.

And the response of the trade union leadership is nothing but a pip-squeak. Yes, there are some declarations that there will be no easy deals, no compromises etc. There will be the usual shadow-boxing by the parties involved. Public condemnations will issue forth. But practice reveals that principles are quickly ditched. Public sector pay and pensions have been under constant attack without a whimper of protest: special pay claims were jettisoned with the total connivance of ICTU.

Following the failure of breakthrough at national level, some unions have lodged pay claims but they intend to take no action whatsoever to achieve them. They will refuse to mobilise direct

action, strikes or sit-ins. They will avoid confrontation at all costs. Under pressure from the working class, some one-day stoppages may be tolerated to let off a bit of steam and offer some leverage to the highly paid trade union bureaucrats in the talks process. The union bosses, the brokers of industrial peace, will undoubtedly show considerable flexibility in arriving at solutions in the behind-the-scene sessions to secure a rotten compromise.

The Labour Party is only too eager to surrender the political independence of the working class via a desired coalition arrangement with Fine Gael, the conservative opposition party. Labour are currently hankering for a few

ministerial crumbs from the table if they come to power. There will be some huffing and puffing about the partnership deal process, nothing more and nothing less.


All this suggests that workers must act for themselves. Twenty years of social partnership has paralysed workers' activism. Many have no experience whatsoever of fighting for a pay claim.

There is a need to build from the grassroots, reaching out to the rank and file in the trade unions and broadening out the struggle to embrace the unemployed, agency workers, students and community groups to oppose cuts in health, education, welfare and local services.

Maureen Gallagher

USA

Rightward moving Obama in McCain's sights

 SOME 3,000 delegates gathered in late August at the Democratic Party's nominating convention in Denver, Colorado, to anoint Barack Obama as their presidential candidate. The previous week Obama had announced his vice-presidential running mate, veteran member of the US Senate, Joe Biden, from Delaware.

Biden is a supposed blue collar Democrat, the "poorest" member of what is tantamount to an elected club of multi-millionaires, who they hope will be capable of addressing the white working class components of the Party's electoral base in a way that has eluded Obama. Most pundits consider him a wise choice, replete with the foreign policy experience (i.e. proven willingness to preside over US military ventures overseas) that Obama lacks. The convention itself went off without a major hitch, as Hillary Clinton dutifully played her part and made an unambiguous call to her disgruntled supporters to rally to Obama, while husband

Bill made no attempt to upstage the nominee.

Outside the convention centre there was a brief flurry of anxiety over an alleged plot to assassinate Obama involving a hapless looking crew of booze and drug-addled racists. There were anti-war and other protests amid tight security, but no violent images to detract from the triumph unfolding inside. The convention reached its climax on the final night as Obama delivered his acceptance speech.

Much of the mainstream media had concluded that "Team Obama" had staged an almost flawless performance, placing the Democratic candidate into pole position for the remaining two months of the presidential contest. But then with the Democrats on their way out of Denver, the John McCain campaign unleashed "Sarah Barracuda" – otherwise known as Sarah Palin, a little known politician from the sparsely populated state of Alaska, who had acquired the nickname for her

aggressive style on the basketball court.

Up to that point the Republicans had appeared in disarray, with their convention in St Paul, Minnesota curtailed in response to the threat posed by Hurricane Gustav. But then 72-year-old McCain pulled off a media coup with the selection of a woman, 28 years his junior, as his running mate.

In contrast to Biden, the image of Sarah Palin was suddenly plastered on papers and magazines sold at supermarket checkout counters across the US. Whether the choice of Palin proves such a populist masterstroke come November remains to be seen, but for the time being the nomination of a fundamentalist Christian, who has suddenly become the archetype of the "working mom", has helped propel McCain into a modest opinion poll lead, and energised the socially reactionary base of Republican activists.

Outside the Republican convention 10,000 anti-war demonstrators had gathered only to face brutal police repression. Hundreds of arrests took place during the convention itself, with hundreds more in its aftermath. Even the widely respected left-leaning journalist, Amy Goodman, was arrested.

The mainstream media barely mentioned the use of pepper gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades against unarmed, overwhelmingly non-violent demonstrators, so the spectacle of the McCain/Palin coronation was virtually untarnished.

There are good reasons to believe that Obama's setback is merely temporary and that he will still become the first African-American to capture the US presidency. But the fact that the Palin vice-presidential nomination has so altered the trajectory of the campaign speaks volumes about the marginalised role of real political issues in the contest.

Supporters of the supposedly "liberal" Hillary Clinton suddenly switched allegiance to the Republicans on the basis of John McCain selecting a woman, despite

the fact that she is a virulent opponent of abortion, champions the teaching of "creationism" in state schools and expressed an interest in banning certain books from her town's library.

Obama's skin colour is an undeniable factor in the campaign, and deeply ingrained racist attitudes may still cost the Democrats the White House come November. On the other hand, the Obama candidacy has spurred unprecedented levels of voter registration, not least among African Americans, who just might tip the balance in such "swing" states as Ohio and Pennsylvania. There is both anecdotal and statistical evidence to suggest that Obama's campaign has energised sections of the inner city black population, which have largely abstained from recent elections.

Leaving aside some important but still superficial differences between McCain and Obama, would an Obama victory really make a substantive difference to US workers and the poor, or to those who have been at the sharp end of the Bush administration's global "war on terror" since 2001?

As the campaign has progressed, Obama's talk of change has become

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all the more vacuous as he has moved ever rightwards over a wide range of issues, not least US imperialism's foreign policy. On the Iraq war there is still some semblance of a pledge to withdraw all US combat troops within 16 months of taking office - roughly by May 2010.

However, Obama has no intention of bringing tens of thousands of US soldiers "home". His clear pledge has been to increase troop numbers in Afghanistan and he has effectively

endorsed the sort of special forces operations which have already been authorised by George Bush in the border areas of Pakistan.

The Democrats under Obama are now committed to increasing US military spending still further, while candidate Obama joined candidate McCain on a Columbia University platform marking the anniversary of 9/11, to lament the college's current campus ban on the Reserve Officer Training Corps.

On Israel the Democrats have often been more unequivocally pro-Zionist than the Bush administration, but Obama was accused of being soft in his support for Israel while contesting the nomination against Hillary Clinton. In his speech to the American Israel Political Action Committee he went even further than either Clinton or Bush, pledging support for Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, and giving the green light to Israel to act against a perceived Iranian threat, though Obama has been less bellicose towards Iran than McCain.

As for domestic policies, his economic programme offers nothing for US workers who are facing rising unemployment and falling living standards. US leftist

Barry Sheppard recently wrote a damning critique:

"Obama referred to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his [Democratic convention] speech. But he is staying clear of proposing any programs and reforms of the type FDR was compelled to implement during the 1930s Great Depression and labour radicalisation. Obama has no plan to help families facing home foreclosures. He is silent on the burning need to launch a massive public works program to rebuild

the nation's crumbling infrastructure and provide work for the unemployed. He is against raising the minimum wage to where it was in 1970 – \$10 an hour in today's dollars from the present \$6.25." (See http://directaction.org.au/issue4/obama_means_more_war)

For now, however, Obama remains the candidate with the backing of virtually the whole of the trade union bureaucracy. He is the candidate whom the mass of African Americans are likely to support in unprecedented numbers and he will almost certainly win a sizeable majority of the Latino vote across the country as a whole.

If only on the basis of "lesser evilism", he remains the choice of many who are adamantly against

both the Iraq and Afghan wars, and would desperately like to see a comprehensive programme of free healthcare for the whole population.

The votes for the likes of Cynthia McKinney and Ralph Nader are sure to be derisory. And so the long-standing US version of the crisis of political representation for the working class and oppressed goes on through 2008.

Whether an Obama victory, still anything but a foregone conclusion, and the subsequent disillusionment with the reality of his administration proves a catalyst to a much more profound radicalisation will prove a crucial challenge to the ranks of US leftists over the next four years.

George Binette

out their anti-worker and anti-immigrant attacks lies in the creation of the NPA.

Clearly, there is a space for an alternative to the reformist left in France. The Parti Socialist (PS) and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) both failed miserably in the 2007 elections, despite the widespread hostility of workers, youth and immigrant communities towards the UMP. The PCF in particular suffered, forced to confront the fact that it was no longer a national force, its ongoing decline brought sharply into relief by its abysmal election result that placed the PCF below the LCR.

The LCR is correct to place the fight for an alternative to the reformist left at the top of its agenda. The working class is facing a decisive struggle against the government, but whilst the willingness to fight the government is clearly there, French workers lack an organisational force to give their spontaneous outbreaks of struggle a concrete and coherent political form.

But what kind of party does the working class need? At first glance it seems that the LCR is advocating a very different kind of party from the traditional reformist parties, since it is calling for an anti-capitalist party. Already this has caused problems in the leadership of the LCR with the remaining minority faction, organised around Christian Piquet, arguing against an anti-capitalist party and in favour, instead, of an alliance with the left wing of the PS, the PCF and the Greens. The NPA, they claim, will be an obstruction to such alliance since most of these forces will run a mile from anti-capitalism.

So is the LCR bucking the recent trend amongst the European far left who have been promoting broad left reformist formations? Is the NPA going to be a revolutionary party? Certainly, the LCR claims that they want to mobilise the "tens of thousands" of men and women who want to "revolutionise society". But this does not mean they think that the way to do that is by building a revolutionary party. Their charismatic and affable

FRANCE

A new party but the same old problems

IN JANUARY this year, at its national congress, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) voted to launch a campaign for new anti-capitalist party, the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA). Since then, the activity of the LCR has been focused on building local committees which are to form the basis of the party. The founding conference is due to take place early next year, after which time the LCR will cease to exist.

Their bold decision to launch the NPA initiative is based on an analysis of the state of the French workers' movement and on the growth in support for the LCR in recent elections.

French workers have frequently shown themselves to be the most militant class fighters in Europe. Throughout the 1990s and over the last decade, France has been repeatedly rocked by intense class struggle. However, the outcome of these displays of workers' militancy has been mixed. Major victories,

such as the successful fight against plans to limit the wages and rights of young workers and the resounding rejection of the neo-liberal European constitution, have demonstrated the strength of the workers' movement.

On the other hand, there have been key areas of struggle (such as pensions) where, despite the militancy of the working class, major gains have been rolled back. Successive governments have been able to carry out a gradual privatisation of parts of the public sector, whilst regressive authoritarian attacks on immigrants have continued apace.

The electoral victory of President Sarkozy's right wing UMP last year signalled the chance for the bourgeoisie to change the balance of forces decisively in its favour by transforming the patchwork picture of defeats and victories into a decisive victory for the ruling class. For the LCR, the road to preventing the right from carrying

spokesperson, Olivier Besancenot, makes this clear in a response to the question of whether the NPA will be a revolutionary party:

“Probably not . . . Otherwise, we could merely continue – and continue the LCR! – as before, but better obviously! We need of course, a common foundation: the defence of radical proposals, opposition to the capitalist system, a strong commitment to mobilisations, political independence from the PS. This common platform will not answer a priori any questions, tactical or strategic. Some will remain open. But we believe that there are tens of thousands of men and women that are available to build a party for struggles and mobilisations.” (International Viewpoint 398, March 2008)

Elsewhere Besancenot has argued that the NPA would be ecological, feminist, even Guevarist, but certainly not revolutionary.

So why the ambiguity? Why, if the LCR is convinced that a party organised on the basis of “opposition to capitalism” is a real possibility in France today, do they not draw the obvious programmatic conclusions and fight for the NPA to make a clear break with the discredited politics of reformism and declare itself a revolutionary party?

On paper, the LCR rejects this approach for two reasons. First the LCR argue that a Leninist or Trotskyist party would be unable to attract the new layers that are searching for an alternative. Secondly, the LCR argues that the programme of the party has to emerge organically from the committees that will form the NPA, rather than being imposed from above. This is in fact the old argument for a “half way house” party re-hashed. It is one we are very familiar with in Britain, it was the basis of the Scottish Socialist party, the Socialist Alliance, Respect etc. Workers aren’t revolutionary enough, we have to create, militant but non-revolutionary parties to attract them. It is a dishonest and disastrous tactic. And where does the LCR think the programme is going to “emerge” from in the

committees, except from the most militant and politically experienced members? It is an excuse for the LCR to look for ways to blunt their own programme, because they have no confidence in its appeal to “broad forces”.

Besancenot has correctly argued that top-down approaches to unity have failed (whilst failing to acknowledge the role of the LCR in pushing for these kind of unity initiatives with various forces, from the critical Stalinist Pierre Juquin to various dribs and drabs of the post-68 “alternative” movement). However, he then goes on to conclude that this means there is no place in the NPA to discuss the legacy of the past. In other words the NPA will not be the place to discuss that old chestnut, reform or revolution, since the new layers drawn to the NPA will not “identify” with this debate.

In fact, far from being a break from the politics of the past, this is in keeping with the “top-down” approaches to unity, only then the issue of reform or revolution was shoved under the carpet to keep the reformist leaders on board – today they have no faith either in their own conception of the revolutionary programme, or in the openness of the working class to different ideas.

What is positive, however, and a welcome break from the past, is that the NPA initiative is rooted in local communities and ongoing workers’ struggles

What is positive, however, and a welcome break from the past, is that the NPA initiative is rooted in local communities and ongoing workers’ struggles. The LCR has clearly recognised that in the absence of a left force or grouping capable of mobilising the most militant sections of the working class, it is possible to go directly to the workers in their localities and in their struggles. In this alone the NPA is to be welcomed.

Since the beginning of the year,

local committees have sprung up around the country. The national meeting of local committees held in June this summer brought together 800 delegates representing 300 committees, and demonstrated that the NPA was attracting layers beyond the LCR. In addition there are 50 youth committees.

The PCF and the PS are clearly rattled; the PS has even set up a special group to monitor the fortunes of the NPA. Lutte Ouvrière (LO), the other main Trotskyist organisation in France, living up to its infamous sectarianism, has refused to be involved in the NPA, preferring to cosy up to the PCF and even the PS. Last year LO stood on joint electoral platforms with the reformists and currently serves as a left cover for reformist local administrations.

The NPA has the potential to be a crucial tool for organising and uniting the various struggles that are taking place in France. But it also needs to be a forum for serious debate about what political programme is needed both in terms of fighting the immediate attacks launched by Sarkozy and his government, and in mapping out a strategy that can give concrete meaning to “anti-capitalism”.

Revolutionaries must play a key

role in this discussion, and not shy away from the key questions of power, the need to smash the state etc. Yes, the programme of the NPA must be forged organically from the working class struggles on which the NPA wants to base itself, rather than being imposed by a bureaucratic elite with a prepared agenda, but leadership consists in saying what is needed if capitalism’s iniquities are to be uprooted and not just ameliorated.

By Christina Purcell