

WORKERS

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OCTOBER 2005 £1



DON'T LET BLAIR DESTROY OUR NHS



Morrisons workers vote to strike

03



Congress: signs of life

06



Katrina lashes the White House

11

WORKERS

“The sentence from Brussels

THE EUROPEAN Court of Justice's ruling of 13 September gives the EU the power to jail British citizens. After a qualified majority vote (i.e., no British veto), the EU could now force all EU members to impose criminal penalties, including prison sentences, on their citizens for breaking EU rules. It could force British courts to imprison people, even if government, parliament and courts were opposed.

So, for example, refusal to implement the EU's absurd Physical Agents (Electromagnetic Fields) Directive, which bans medical workers from standing close to MRI scanners on health and safety grounds even though there is no evidence of

risk, would become a criminal offence.

The European Commission welcomed the ruling. Its officials are already talking about introducing EU crimes and criminal penalties for various offences.

The Court always said its job was "overcoming the resistance of national governments to European integration". Its new ruling creates a body of European criminal law that all member states must adopt, which turns the EU into a single criminal jurisdiction. Despite the French and Dutch No votes, the EU is still making itself into a state.

We need the referendum on the Constitution, as the next step in our withdrawal from the EU.

Two Blairs, one attack

WHEN POLITICAL LEADERS such as Blair lose their grip on reality they often take refuge in draconian laws and censorship to appear strong and decisive. The current dictatorial proposals are no accident: the political standing of Bush and Blair is at an all-time low.

Metropolitan Police chief Sir Ian Blair (no relation), speaking to a meeting of superintendents about the future of policing, has said troops should undertake firearm duties previously done by police officers (and according to Brazilian newspapers, it's happening already: they claim that Jean Charles de Menezes was shot at Stockwell tube by members of the SAS). Some police officers would be given extra powers to confiscate driving licences

and issue Asbos on the spot.

His comments are part of an agenda that also includes the transfer of tasks to civilians and the replacement of the Police Negotiating Board with regional agreements on pay and conditions. This is the same nonsense which is being imposed on other areas of the public sector, such as education.

The government, for its part, plans more legislation on the limitations of civil liberties, and more censorship. Anyone, for instance, writing about or commenting on a recent historical event, where terrorist events took place, may be guilty of an offence and could receive up to five years. Terrorist bombs and Blair's state machine are two sides of the same attack on British workers.



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Contents – September 2005

News

Struggle at Morrisons, p3; Uncertainty over UK Coal, p4; The Bolkestein threat to the Olympics, p5; News Analysis: Iraq – from bad to worse , p6

03

Features

TUC Congress: signs of life, p6 ; Hurricane Katrina, the White House... and Cuba, p11; Don't let Blair destroy the NHS, p12

06



SUPERMARKETS	Struggle at Morrisons
TRANSPORT	Scab security peril
MINING	Uncertainty over UK Coal
UKRAINE	Orange squeezed
OLYMPICS	The Bolkestein threat
NURSING	Students fight poverty
POLICE	London force cut
EUROTRASH	The latest from Brussels
NEWS ANALYSIS	Iraq: from bad to worse
WHAT'S ON	Coming soon

Supermarket struggle

MORRISONS, THE SUPERMARKET chain, has been forced to the negotiating table and a three-day strike set for 23 September – coinciding with the start of the Labour Party conference – has been postponed pending talks. As WORKERS went to press, the action had been called off for nine days. Around 4,000 warehouse and distribution workers, predominantly GMB and TGWU members, had voted overwhelmingly for action at three key depots in protest at redundancy proposals from the company. The ballot result, by T&G workers in Bristol, Northwich and Wakefield, and GMB at Aylesford and Warrington, was overwhelming, with more than 75% in favour on good turnouts.

A total of nine days' strike action and an overtime ban are scheduled, aimed at stopping job cuts resulting from the company's planned closure of three distribution centres in Kent, Bristol and Cheshire that had previously belonged to Safeways, which Morrisons took over two years ago. Morrisons have 12 further centres, run by Excell or Christian Salvesen, and predominantly represented by USDAW. Despite recently building new centres, Morrisons says it decided to sack 2,500 employees because it has surplus capacity within distribution. Picketing had been planned for the other 20 depots, which will include the 12 depots contracted out by Morrisons to Excell and Christian Salvesen.

It has been very difficult to organise this group of workers in the past, because of casualisation, contracting out and the hostility of the supermarket employers, so this action is of great significance. The TGWU has recently won a number of tribunal cases against the company over its refusal to pay recognised shop stewards for time off for meetings. The management has been attempting to drive wedges between the unions that organise there, trying to negotiate separately with the unions, but they are acting together at local and national level.

Morrisons did not consult over the job losses, say the unions, and Brian Revell, National Officer of the TGWU, says the company has sought to block trade union activity. Company boss Sir Ken Morrison boasted that his door is always open, but according to the TGWU, the company was attempting to deal only with USDAW. Revell said it was not for the company to decide who represents the workforce.

Since buying the Safeways' British stores for £3 billion two years ago, Morrisons has been having difficulties and has sold 180 stores. Sales have declined, the share price has fallen, and there have been reports of boardroom struggles.

TRANSPORT Scab security peril

A LETTER to Eurostar from the Department of Transport's Transec security body revealed last month that the use of poorly trained scabs resulted in an alarming fall in the efficiency of crucial counter-terrorist X-ray baggage checks over the August Bank Holiday, when workers went on strike over pay.

The efficiency of electronic bag checks at Waterloo fell below half the level set for the training of staff; the figures for Ashford were "probably much lower". The scabs were recruited from Hungary by Chubb, the security sub-contractor, and rushed through an inadequate training course to replace locked out RMT members.

HONG KONG Trouble in Disneyland

A UNION LEADER has accused Disney of failing to care for the health of its workers at the new Disneyland in Hong Kong. Lee Cheuk-yan, general secretary of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, complained that employees can only drink water during their 15-minute breaks, which come every four hours, instead of the two allowed in the US.

On the eve of the opening ceremony, local officials clashed with theme park management after it told health officers investigating food poisoning to remove their caps and badges "to avoid scaring the customers". Disney was told it was not above the law. The company has also faced accusations that Disney products are being produced by Chinese sub-contractors in sweatshop conditions.

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

EUOTRASH

The latest from Brussels

Vote, again

AUSTRIAN CHANCELLOR Wolfgang Schüssel has urged rerunning the French and Dutch referendums on the proposed European Union Constitution, saying, "perhaps in 2007, if in one or other country there has been political change, then a second attempt can be made."

Not to be outdone, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the principal author of the EU Constitution, interviewed on Radio 4's Today programme, said French voters voted "no" to Turkish membership of the EU, not to the Constitution. He said that there needed to be careful consideration about how the Constitution could be adopted after which "there will be a new presentation, and I think, an approval".

Globalisation, again

THE EUROPEAN Commission's Vice-President has told the International Herald Tribune, "People must be told that globalisation is our policy. ... I see a clear danger when people are saying less Europe is better. More integration is not the problem, it is the solution."

Cut, again

THE EUROPEAN Central Bank's Principal Economist has told EU member states to cut public spending, privatise services and introduce user fees.

Carry on regardless

MEANWHILE the EU is carrying on regardless, treating No votes against the Constitution as if they were Yes. It is setting up, with no legal authorisation, a European External Action Service, a European Defence Agency, EU military structures, an External Border Agency, a Foreign Minister, a European Space Programme, an EU criminal code, a common EU asylum policy, a Fundamental Rights Agency and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

On the rise

THE NUMBER of migrants from Eastern Europe EU member states has risen dramatically, due to the government's open door policy. The Home Office admits that every month 14,000 arrive from Eastern Europe: the government told us in May last year that between 5,000 and 13,000 would arrive in the next year.



Burston Strike School, Norfolk, where the long strike was commemorated in a march and rally last month. The school is now a museum recording the struggle.

Uncertainty over UK Coal

UK COAL, after vigorously denying entering into takeover discussions with Alchemy Partners, now acknowledges that there will be tentative merger talks. In addition to Alchemy Partners, various US mining conglomerates are reputed to be buying a shareholding base in UK Coal.

The company has reported a trebling of pre-tax losses to £30.5 million. And with the usual madness of the Stock Market, the share price for UK Coal has risen as the vultures hover.

After mothballing Harworth, UK Coal has also decided to do the same to a second deep mine, Rossington, threatening a further 260 mining jobs. This comes at a time when both the price and demand for coal is rising – economic facts which seem to have passed UK Coal by.

The US-appointed Chief Executive of UK Coal is calling for greater productivity from Britain's miners, a little difficult when pits are being closed or mothballed. He wants productivity raised from 5–10 tonnes per miner per day to 20 tonnes in the first instance to reach a break even point, with a target of 50 tonnes per day – US Mining averages – to reach profitability. Profitability, though, is something he believes impossible due to the "regulatory and other" obstructions in Britain – probably a reference to the National Union of Mineworkers, which has fought consistently to preserve coalmining in this country.

FURTHER EDUCATION

The cost of PFI

IN 2002 NEWBURY College in Berkshire became the first to relocate as a result of a PFI investment – one of the largest in a British further education college. At the time, the college's governors said that the only way it could raise money was by using a PFI to move to a greenfield site.

Now, according to a consultant's report seen by WORKERS, the college is

running at a deficit, and the principal reason for the deficit...the PFI contract, which, says the report, "will remain a massive financial burden to the college for many years to come".

Given the much higher than expected – and much higher than the British average – premises costs, which are part of the PFI contract and cannot be negotiated, the college has to look at other areas for savings.

A case of out of the frying pan, into the fire?

UKRAINE**Orange splits**

THE WESTERN-BACKED "orange revolution" in Ukraine of less than a year ago is in trouble, with splits in the leadership and corruption in high places. President Yushchenko has had to sack his entire government, including the Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, a billionaire gas oligarch who was originally on Interpol's wanted list and the power behind the throne.

The various factions disagreed on how to divide the spoils of the Ukrainian economy and used the interesting tactic of re-nationalising certain industries and then

privatising them – a move which had the eager backing of Western investors.

The new prime minister is Yekhanurov, who only came to power after deals were made with last year's Russian candidate, and who was involved in the earlier privatisations of 1999–2001.

Next year's elections in March are expected to see more faction fighting, with Tymoshenko seeking a return to power, and almost certainly more interference from the Russians, the European Union and the United States.

The Ukrainian people will need to avoid relapsing into cynicism, and instead reassert their authority over their legislature.

Bolkestein Olympics threat

WORKERS ARE under threat from an EU directive that undermines their wages and conditions of work. The Bolkestein Directive (named after its author) allows for an EU-based company that wins contracts for any services to apply regulation arising from the country of origin. A Polish, Lithuanian, Estonian or Czech company would apply its regulatory legislation instead of being obliged to follow British laws, such as those covering health and safety, employment protection, race, sex, disability, age discrimination, the minimum wage and the right to join a trade union.

This has led to the re-registering of companies in countries with the most anti-worker legislation. The Bolkestein Directive will allow "flags of convenience" to be hoist over all services Europe-wide.

Unison has raised the issue with Newham Council, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the Mayor's Office, in the context of the preparations for the 2012 Olympic Games. The grandiose scenario of the regeneration of East London and the Thames Gateway as envisaged by the GLA and local councils, could now take on nightmarish aspects as the EU attempts to drive down wages, terms and conditions, employment rights and get round equalities legislation.

NURSING**Students fight poverty**

THE CAMPAIGN to fight poverty among student nurses continues to gather pace. A recent Unison survey demonstrates that in under two years the number of student nurses leaving their training with debts of over £10,000 has risen from 6% to 14%. Around 55% of graduating nurses have debts ranging from £1,000 to £9,999. Unison is calling for the re-instatement of employment and wage protection previously afforded to student nurses before the introduction of the bursary system.

Following the success in January of Unison and other nursing and midwifery unions at the Employment Appeal Tribunal, over the Department of Health's discriminatory action against student nurses who became pregnant during their training, new Department of Health advice removing the discriminatory guidelines

have been issued. This is a consolidation of many years of campaigning by health unions for maternity rights for student nurses.

AEROSPACE**Reinstatement fight continues**

THE FIGHT FOR the re-instatement of the Amicus convenor at the Rolls Royce aero-engine test department in Bristol continues. There has been big support for the convenor, victimised for carrying out trade union duties.

An interim employment tribunal has been won, forcing the employers to continue to pay the convenor until the victimisation case can be heard. All-out strike action by the 96 workers directly employed in the section has paralysed the factory. Strike ballots of a further 800 workers are under way. The convenor has refused to take offers of £50,000 and £100,000 to go away.

WHAT'S ON**Coming soon****OCTOBER**

Thursday 20 October, 7.30pm

"Migration and Class Power"

WORKERS public meeting

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (nearest tube, Holborn),

A chance to meet and discuss one of today's hot topics: why the government is encouraging the mass immigration of workers from the new eastern European states of the EU and elsewhere; where it is all leading in terms of jobs, conditions and wages; and why the survival of the working class depends on keeping control over the supply of labour. Everyone is welcome.

Saturday 22 October

The Women Chainmakers Festival:

"Raising the Banner"

Black Country Living Museum, West Midlands, 11.00 to 17.00

The event includes keynote speakers Tony Benn and Frances O'Grady (tbc). Union banners and costumed participants welcome! Cost £5.00, £2.50 concessions including free museum entry. Details call Suneeta or Suzy on 0121 521 5608 or go to www.bclm.co.uk.

POLICE**London force cut**

AT A TIME WHEN London faces terrorist threats, the strength of its police force is being cut. The cuts stem from a Home Office Initiative and a spending review being carried out by the Metropolitan Police Force. Despite assurances that numbers will increase, a pilot project in Bexley gives a truer picture of the realities to come.

Bexley was given £2.5 million to run a special project which would introduce extra civilians such as Police Community Support Officers to release police officers for "up front" policing. To start with they could maintain their existing number of officers, as well as the people needed for "civilianisation".

Now the money is running out and the number of full police officers is to be cut by 23. It is highly likely that the Metropolitan Police Service will now try to replicate this across London. Two years ago it was suggesting it might be able to manage to cut up to 50% of officers by this process. This could mean losses of 8,000 officers across London.

Iraq: from bad to worse

US VICE PRESIDENT Dick Cheney said in June that the insurgency in Iraq was "in its last throes". He earlier said that January's elections would mean "the end of the insurgency". Rumsfeld said on 26 June, "The insurgency could go on for any number of years. Insurgencies tend to go on for five, six, eight, ten, twelve years." Blair said on 27 June, "I think two years will be enough and more than enough to establish security." Three different estimates – it just shows that they will say anything to get their way. What they will not do, until we make them do so, is withdraw the troops.

Death toll

From March 2003 to 3 August 2005, 1,826 US soldiers had been killed and 13,000 had been wounded. 93 British soldiers and 101 other Coalition soldiers had also been killed, as well as 4,895 Iraqi soldiers and between 23,209 and 26,264 civilians. The CIA has admitted that Iraq is now a more effective training ground for Islamic militants than Afghanistan was under the Taliban.

The Attorney-General admitted in his Confidential Note to Blair of 26 March 2003, "it must be borne in mind that the lawfulness of any occupation after the conflict has ended is still governed by the legal basis for the use of force". As the attack was unlawful, so the ensuing war against the Iraqi people's sovereignty and political independence is unlawful.

International law

Security Council Resolution 1483 of 22 May 2003 did not legitimise the invasion or the occupation. It called on the occupying powers to conduct the occupation in accordance with international law. (Similarly, the UN has not legitimised the Israeli occupation when it called on Israel to conduct its occupation of the occupied territories in accordance with international law.) Resolution 1483 stressed "the right of the Iraqi people freely to determine their own political future and control their own natural resources" and asserted "that the day when Iraqis govern themselves must come quickly".

The US government is preparing to attack Syria on the grounds that it houses a specific location from which foreign fighters are coming into Iraq. This is the same phoney excuse that the US state used when it sent forces to invade Laos and Cambodia during its illegal war of aggression against Vietnam.

Polls suggest that 60% of US citizens now want the troops out of Iraq. Only 42% approve of Bush – the lowest rating of any second-term President since Nixon during Watergate.

The dignity of many debates at the TUC Congress – signs of manufacturing, trade union rights, p

TUC Congress – signs of

WHAT WAS THIS YEAR'S TUC about and what did it do? It received very little coverage in the media. Keen workers will only have found out from their own delegation reports and from late night TV which showed the live debates. The point is, the keenest will have been interested. Yes, the TUC comes and goes in a flash, but class conscious workers in their unions are not finished – far from it.

When the workers who had provided the response to the London bombings stood on the TUC platform we were all very proud, and proud that it is our gathering that respects most graciously the qualities of courage, humanity and fortitude they had shown. When the TUC (virtually unreported) eventually opposed the EU Constitution almost unanimously – far from dead and still a threat – a bit of history was in the making. When the TUC unanimously called for a withdrawal of troops from Iraq it held firmly onto its place among those calling for a new world order based on peace.

The dignity of many debates in defence of public services, energy supply, manufacturing, trade union rights,

'Class consciousness in Britain resides primarily in the unions...'



Photo: Andrew Wiard/www.reportphotos.com

TUC in Brighton in defence of public services, energy supply, pensions, health and education was a gear up from the usual...

life

pensions, health and education was a gear up from the usual. While opposition to the EU Constitution is the key to linking the various concerns together at one level, at another the connections were still not being made. Education and health will be further privatised because of the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, which the EU intended to cap with one voice through a Constitution. Academy Schools and the break up of Primary Care Trusts are the expression of this. Blair's millionaire mates are rich and healthy while our people are poor and unhealthy: the politics are clear. Only when the unions wage war on Labour will we be getting somewhere.

Meanwhile in the absence of indigenous energy supplies, and while craven to the EU, the Labour government has to be supine to the US invasion of Iraq. The TUC unanimously condemned

the war and called for immediate withdrawal of troops, but it failed to appreciate that it also has the power to force the withdrawal.

The General Secretary of the TUC quipped that he hoped the Prime Minister would enjoy his meal on the way to the UN, as if the Gate Gourmet dispute was more important than ending the war which has targeted civilians and killed 100,000 people mainly women and children. How can unions here get on with their work while our weapons of mass destruction kill workers abroad?

Class consciousness

Class consciousness in Britain resides primarily in the unions. Unlike the USA and most other countries, we have one trade union centre and are not divided on political, religious or other lines. Our movement is about trade, skill and craft,

specialism and knowing about your job. You are a union member first and an employee somewhere low down the line. It is the reassertion of this concept that is pulling moribund trade union centres apart elsewhere, especially in the US.

Yet despite the key role of unions here, 20 million workers are outside of them, and few take notice of the annual gathering of workers' representatives whose deliberations carry more political import than those in parliament. It is a strange twist of history. The British working class organised in their unions generally remain more significant and potentially powerful than any other organisation. That is why we must re-engage in the unions. To write them off and to disparage the TUC is so easy to do.

Continued on page 8



Pensions back to haunt TUC

THE GOVERNMENT waited until after the TUC Congress to table, via the Local Government Pension Scheme, new attacks on pensions. The plans were unveiled at a meeting with the unions on 22 September, and involve changes to early retirement rules, an extra 1% in employee contributions, an end to transitional protections – and further changes, yet to be announced, in 2008.

Industrial action against the previous set of proposals was called off (some would say it was only called so it could be called off) on the excuse that the general election was in the offing. Now, predictably, the proposals are back, and, say the unions, they are even worse than before.

A statement from the unions says they are “back on a war footing”.

Left: 19 June 2004, and the TUC's Pay Up for Pensions march.

Continued from page 7

When Brendan Barber joined with the CBI and government to welcome migration of labour into Britain as good for the economy, we saw the worst side. The politics of the lowest common denominator is the politics that the Labour government and capitalism most admire. That is why the Labour Party meets after the TUC. It is why it also comes in force to the TUC to tell unions how powerless they are.

Giving up responsibility to of government and thinking that politics takes place only in parliament, not in the workplace remain the fused ideological weaknesses of British workers and their trade unions.

Labour Party

When the Labour Party meets next month it will deny and oppose everything that the TUC eventually stood for. With a number of good motions, there has seldom been a TUC closer to resisting unbridled bourgeois power than this one, nor a TUC that has squandered its advances already, by not planning to take its policies assertively forward.

The machine will say we are against the EU Constitution but in love with the EU. That we are against the war, but not for pulling troops out just at the moment. This is about the leadership, a truly appalling thing. Such a dilemma can only be resolved by workers reclaiming their workplaces and playing a part in the democracy of their unions.

We get what we fight for. This year's TUC showed we can now get a lot more.

'Bring our troops back!'

IN MOVING the unanimously supported motion on Iraq, the CYWU delegate, its president Doug Nicholls, said the following at the TUC:

"Our message is for our government mainly but now that George Bush has taken full responsibility for the disastrous response to the hurricane in his country, let us say to him, time to take your 150 thousand troops back from Iraq and send them to Mississippi and Louisiana to save the lives and rebuild the homes of our brothers and sisters for a change.

"And Congress, as a union with our HQ in Birmingham we say to our own government: if you didn't believe in state intervention to save Rover and the mining industry, you can't afford one penny more than the £5 billion you have already spent on state intervention to devastate Iraq. Bring our nine thousand troops back and invest here.

"There are 27 million people in Iraq. 39% of them are under the age of 15. Half the population are under 18. No surprise then that since the invasion two years ago at the very least 3,500 of the official 25 thousand killed have been innocent kids.

"A quarter of children in Iraq suffer from chronic malnutrition. Diarrhoea killed two out of ten children before the war. Now it's four out of ten. US and British troops have systematically targeted water purification and sewage works. ...

"...The medical journal THE LANCET estimates that in reality 100,000 civilians have been killed by the war in its first 18 months. Most of course were women and children. All hospitals and schools need rehabilitation. The poverty of mass illiteracy has returned. ...

"...US and British governments are past masters at occupation. Their tactics are simple, they fan the flames of sectarian hatred and seek to introduce a constitution to divide the country into competing regions. It is they who fan the flames of terrorism.

"And to the terrorists who kill British and Iraqi workers including the 200 building workers blown up this morning, we say you support those you most condemn.

"If you don't believe you can create paradise on earth and have to kill workers to get there, leave those of us who believe we can alone. ...

"...How can we at this Congress really hold our heads high in the struggles we have for manufacturing, public services, education, health and social justice at home while British troops are destroying these things in Iraq? ...

"...The extent to which we are successful in pursuing this policy will be a measure of our success on all the other issues we have debated this week. We are truly not free in Britain as workers while weapons of mass destruction rain down on Iraq."

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WORKERS

PUBLIC MEETING

MIGRATION AND CLASS POWER

**Thursday 20 October, 7.30pm
Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1
All welcome. Nearest tube: Holborn**

**‘The aim of the open-door immigration policy is clear.
It is to reduce wages and conditions to the world minimum...’**

Speaking in Bradford in June, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, said, “Immigration has reduced wage inflation...the inflow of migrant labour, especially in the past year or so from Eastern Europe, has probably led to a diminution of inflationary pressure on the labour market.”

In other words, cheap mass labour from Eastern Europe – the Polish Plumber syndrome – has been used to keep wages stagnant or reduce them. The real purpose of an open-door immigration policy is revealed for what it is: to undermine the wages and conditions of British workers.

Anyone who wants a practical example of this need look no further than Heathrow. The workers at Gate Gourmet were just too expensive, and, even more important, too highly unionised for this spin-off of British Airways. Destroying the union is essential to the project.

Apart from Ireland only Britain – courtesy of Jack Straw and the Labour government – decided to give unrestricted access, from 1 May 2004, to workers from the new Eastern European member states even though transitional arrangements allowed restrictions for up to 7 years. At a stroke, Labour solved the problem of illegal immigration...by making it legal!

The aim of this open-door immigration policy is clear. It is to reduce wages and conditions to the world minimum. In that regard, cheap Polish labour is just a halfway house for capitalism. And already their wages are too high – Polish shipyards, for example, are using even cheaper Russian labour to undercut Scottish yards. Wages in Britain are 20 times those in urban China – and 30 times the Chinese rural wage. The inexorable logic is that unless we suffer wage cuts of 95%, we’re “costing too much”.

For too long some in the trade unions have been so afraid of charges of racism that they have allowed Labour to operate a deliberate policy of weakening workers’ bargaining power on a massive scale. Perhaps those in favour of open-door immigration could explain what is anti-racist about a policy that leads directly to the sacking of hundreds of British women of Indian origin.

In the face of the Bank of England, the Labour government and the European Union, we in Britain will survive only by asserting our class interests. The working class – of every country – must exercise control over the supply of labour.

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Reg Birch:

engineer, trade unionist, communist

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Will Podmore

The floundering US 'superpower' could learn some lessons about solidarity and efficiency from Cuba...

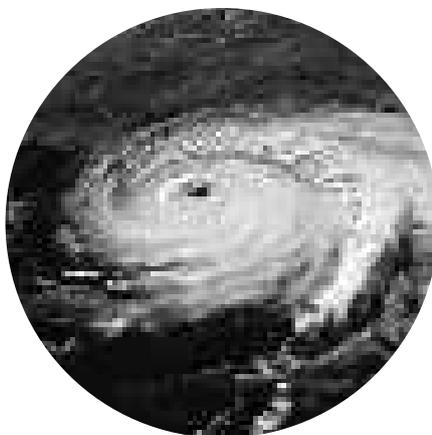
The hurricane, the White House...and Cuba

AFTER THE DEVASTATION caused by Hurricane Katrina, serious accusations have been made about the ability of the US to cope with major incidents of this nature. Then along came Hurricane Rita, with its spectacle of camper vans and 4x4 vehicles carrying one or two passengers each, running out of petrol in 100-mile traffic jams, providing a variant horror story, equally telling against the US way of coping with disaster.

Katrina exposed a failure to plan for or provide evacuation contingency arrangements and defences, a lack of coordination between city, state and federal government levels, and corruption in the appointment of those responsible for emergency management. Further criticisms focus on privatisation of the relief effort and the way that the US treats its poor, violating the dignity of both the living and the dead.

Meanwhile, the military machine is unavailable to help because it is busy trying to occupy a poor nation upon which the US government is failing to impose its system. Add to this the fact that it took nearly two weeks for Bush, the Commander in Chief, to visit New Orleans, the worst affected area. Bush has sacked his pal Michael Brown, Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, a useful scapegoat, whilst promising to head up an investigation, effectively investigating himself.

Lucky that Rita was not so deadly, and of course Bush was at pains to show that he and his government were prepared. But the totally inadequate defences of New Orleans were once again breached, recovery efforts there brought to nought, displaced people now in utter despair.



Hurricanes are not unusual events. There is an annual hurricane season familiar to all Caribbean and Gulf nations. There is advance warning, monitoring and tracking of tropical storms and hurricanes. It is well known that they can do immense damage and that they cannot be controlled. This year it is also well known that the season has started earlier and that the waters of the Caribbean are one

or two degrees warmer than usual, potentially causing the tropical storms and hurricanes to carry more water and become more damaging. So how do others in the region cope with hurricanes? We know that Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua have all suffered massive loss of life over the years due to hurricanes. But one island often in the eye of the storm seems to escape with damage but rarely with fatalities.

Cuba has, over many years, built up a highly planned and effective method for coping with hurricanes. The essence is advanced planning, pre-planned evacuation and involvement of the whole community. Potential storms are monitored well in advance and their movement and growth constantly reviewed. Unlike in the US, the commander in chief takes personal control and responsibility because it is treated as a military operation in which the entire population is mobilised. In the event of a potentially dangerous storm or hurricane approaching, plans are taken off the shelf and activated, the whole community is involved in the planning debate through television and everyone knows what to do. Civil defence, the army and mass

Continued on page 12



Pulling communities together

ALEX MARIN (left) is from Honduras. His family are from the Garifuna people, British-owned slaves in the St Vincent Islands 300 years ago who rebelled and were subsequently dumped on the Mosquito Coast of Honduras as a punishment. His parents were farmers with a couple of cattle when Hurricane Mitch devastated their community in 1998. They lost everything, including many relatives. Cuban doctors arrived soon after the hurricane and brought medical care and helped pull the community back together.

When Cuba agreed a package of medical aid for the five Central American Republics affected, Alex was selected by his community to go to the Latin American School in Havana for medical training. Alex told us, "When Cuba offered free medical training, I could not believe it. Before the hurricane, there were no doctors in our area. After, everything my parents had built up, a small peasant farm, was destroyed. I will qualify this year and return to my community as a doctor. My family and community will be so proud. This is a big step forward for us. And this was only possible because of socialist Cuba, whose doctors are still caring for my people."

Continued from page 11

organisations are involved in the preparations and evacuations. This year, 600,000 people were evacuated in 24 hours as a preparation for the arrival of Hurricane Dennis, reaching almost Category 5 hurricane status as it hit south eastern Cuba. In contrast to George W Bush, the Commander in Chief, Fidel Castro, and his team always visit the areas that have suffered damage as soon as possible after the hurricane has struck with the task of evaluating the effectiveness of the preparations and assessing the medical and housing needs of the population as he did in this case.

Cuba doesn't stop there. Over the years it has responded immediately by sending medical teams to help the survivors of hurricane damage in other countries. In 1998, for example, Hurricane Mitch hit the coasts of Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. The coastal area of these countries, the Mosquito Coast, is inhabited by the poorest people. Hurricane Mitch built up to a powerful Category 4 hurricane and paused inland from the coast, where it dropped all of its water, killing more than 20,000 people. Cuba sent in its doctors straight away, despite the lack of diplomatic relations.

Tens of thousands of lives were saved as the Cuban Medical Brigades brought health care to areas where there was none. Young people from these areas were selected by the countries concerned and sent to Havana where they received free medical training in order to return to their villages as doctors, replacing the Cubans. This concept has been further developed, thanks to cooperation with Venezuela, and this has resulted in material support for the reconstruction of hurricane damage.

Cuba offers medical aid

Cuba's assistance to other countries struck by hurricanes has not excluded the United States. After Hurricane Katrina hit Florida from the east on 25 August causing loss of human life and heavy material damage, it moved serpent-like into the Gulf of Mexico just missing Cuba



but drenching the western province of Pinar del Rio. As it got stronger, on 29 August it pounded the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. On the morning of 30 August, as the last gusts were blowing over these states, the Cuban government realised the magnitude of the disaster that was about to unfold and immediately contacted US government officials through their Interest Section in Washington and offered condolences and medical aid. They put their offer at 12.45 pm asking for "time out" from the state of relations between the two governments because of the gravity of the situation, and because Cuba was nearer to these states than any other country.

Cuba offered to send doctors and nurses as well as three field hospitals to the affected areas. They even suggested that they would not issue publicity about the offer if that would make it easier for the US to accept. At 4.30 pm on that day, after having made the offer, the head of the Cuban Interests Section was received by US Department of State functionary John Reagan.

There was never a response to the offer. A list of countries that had offered help was released to the world by the US government but Cuba was excluded from the list. Three days on, and Cuba was receiving messages from people in those three US states, asking either for Cuban help or questioning why Cuba was not helping. After one more attempt to get a

response from the US government, Cuba decided to make its offer public. By this time, it had identified the 1,100 doctors who were on standby with 25 tons of medical aid, ready to go at a moment's notice. But the agreement of the US authorities never came as the situation became more and more desperate, particularly in New Orleans.

Avoidable neglect

If there is anyone who believes that the neglect of the thousands of souls in New Orleans was unavoidable, then they should ask why the US authorities deliberately refused to allow into the area at the earliest time, more than a thousand doctors and medical supplies from the closest country to the disaster. How many lives were lost as a result? Did the US think that the Cubans were not up to the job? That would be the pot calling the kettle black given the Cuban experience, and ignores their aid to two countries affected by Tsunami.

So why would a country faced with such a calamitous disaster refuse such desperately needed medical aid that could arrive within hours?

Imagine, for one moment, that the US had agreed to accept the offer. Now imagine hundreds of young unarmed Cuban doctors in white coats wading through the waters of New Orleans where only armed police dared to venture according to the media; or setting up a



Left: breached levee at Bellaire Boulevard, New Orleans, 3 September.

Photo: Digital Globe/www.digitalglobe.com

field hospital in the Convention Centre, or in the Astrodome in Houston.

Unreachable?

The world's press had access to those parts of New Orleans that the US authorities said they could not reach to rescue the dying. Imagine the reaction of the poor of New Orleans or those queuing at the Convention Centre or the Astrodome for free medical care or a health check or vaccination.

Might they not have questioned why the world's most powerful nation could not look after its own people whilst a poor neighbouring country, that their own government seeks to destroy, can send brave selfless young doctors to care for the poor in what was effectively a free fire zone?

Might they have started to question their own government's private health care system?

Might they not have wondered why Cuba was so adept in dealing with the health needs of the poor, free of charge, across Latin America and the Caribbean while Vice President Cheney's company Halliburton lines itself up for multibillion-dollar contracts to rebuild New Orleans at the same time that the poor are dying. They would have known that Cuba was itself still recovering from Hurricane Dennis, which caused massive damage in July killing ten.

If we assume that the US government

itself imagined all of these thoughts, it's not difficult to understand why it deliberately chose to sacrifice the lives of its people rather than allow them to think that there is a working humanitarian alternative to its capitalist doctrine of the primacy of greed and profit over life, even in the field of health care.

A poll conducted by US media network NBC concluded that 74% of Americans wanted the Cuban offer to be accepted and Cuba did not stand its offer down. Forty-eight hours after the offer had been made public and there had been no reply from the US authorities, Cuba introduced the team by television to its public and the world on 5 September.

The number of doctors and others had been increased to around 1,600 including more than 1,000 physicians, 350 intensive care specialists, and specialists in cardiology, paediatrics, surgery and gastroenterology, with an average of ten years' experience each and an average age of 32 years. The volume of medical supplies had been increased to 32 tons.

It was announced that although they were waiting patiently for a reply from the US, the team, now named the Henry Reeves Medical Brigade, would be on permanent standby to go anywhere it was needed in the region to assist in disasters caused by hurricanes or epidemics. Henry Reeves, after whom the Brigade has been named, was a US citizen who fought alongside Cubans in the first Cuban war of

independence, dying from his wounds in 1876.

But the doctrine of greed and profit was not the only doctrine that was under threat from Hurricane Katrina. The Gulf coast is home to the US oil industry. Significant refining and drilling capacity was destroyed by Katrina. The price of oil was going through the roof. Capitalist governments screamed that it was a global oil crisis, or it was the result of natural disasters, or the war in Iraq, and Gordon Brown addressed the TUC and called for producers to produce more.

But Venezuela, the world's fifth largest oil producer, and an ally of Cuba, was about to turn the doctrine of market forces and high oil prices on its head. Venezuela donated \$1 million from the state-owned oil company to the US Red Cross and others. It then offered oil to offset the shortages created by Katrina plus medical facilities, field hospitals and doctors, many Cuban trained.

On 6 September, the first Petrocaribe deal was signed with Jamaica. Petrocaribe is an agreement signed by the regional Caribbean governments that will see Venezuelan oil sold to member countries at very significantly reduced prices. The balance between the cheap price and the market price would be spent on social projects, including social and medical care, training doctors in Cuban Emergency Planning etc. At the same time, Venezuela is looking at ways it can sell oil and petrol very cheaply, specifically to the poor of the US, probably through its string of CITGO petrol stations across southern US states.

The Venezuelan offer of oil and medical supplies was also rejected by the US, as was the Cuban offer of doctors and medical aid. Of course, any suggestion of free organised health care, giving or doing something for nothing or selling oil below market prices, is anathema to capitalism. So much so that they are prepared to sacrifice the lives of their own citizens to prevent them from being contaminated with such ideas.

The British Medical Association has revealed that the government plans to privatise the National Health Service's community services...

Stop Blair destroying the NHS

WHILE THE NEWS headlines have been dominated by war in Iraq and hurricanes in the US, the Blair government has been wreaking havoc on the NHS, one of the world's great social achievements. As reported in the June edition of *WORKERS*, plans to hand over NHS facilities to the private sector, via the so-called "independent treatment centres" and other mechanisms, have shown a marked acceleration since Blair was re-elected in May.

The British Medical Association (BMA) has now obtained confidential EU documents which make it clear to the private organisations how they are effectively able to bid for parts of the NHS, and how their market position will be protected. Also over the summer NHS Chief Executive Nigel Crisp released a document called "Commissioning a Patient-led NHS", which has nothing to do with patients or the NHS and everything to do with transfer of NHS community services to the private sector.

Hospital facilities

Immediately after Patricia Hewitt took over as health secretary a deal was advertised in the official journal of the EU inviting private companies to bid for £3 billion worth of contract work to diagnose and treat NHS patients.

In early September when the BMA obtained the confidential documents sent out to the bidding companies, they revealed that the primary purpose was to create "competition" between NHS and private providers, with built-in safeguards for the private sector. It is also clear from these documents that the private companies will be given the opportunity to take over NHS buildings, equipment and staff.

Community services

The plans for community health services share similar features to the plans for hospital services. In particular the hallmark is the fragmentation of a comprehensive integrated service and the transfer of staff to non-NHS organisations. Europe's largest workforce, the NHS, is



Finchley Memorial Community Hospital, London, run by by Barnet Primary Care Trust: even Thatcher did not dare close this hospital, but Blair wants to privatise it.

Photo: Workers

being systematically dismantled. There is also a sense of *déjà vu* in the "Commissioning a Patient-led NHS". Its themes are almost identical to Thatcher's Community Care Act 1990, which dismantled social care services provided by local authorities and transferred government funding to fragmented and unregulated home care agencies.

The document proposes that all services provided outside of hospital including district nursing, school nursing, child health services, sexual health services and the public health infrastructure which deals with infectious disease outbreaks and other public health emergencies should no longer be provided by the NHS. It states that Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) should no longer provide services and by 2008 they should only be allowed to commission such services from the independent or voluntary sector.

Commissioning a patient-led NHS was published on 27 July after the parliamentary recess. It was an act of despotism, as it did not flow from any manifesto commitment or parliamentary

discussion. There has been no discussion of it within the Labour Party or amongst Blair's MPs. It currently applies to England only and hence devolution arrangements help fragment opposition. Ironically, a White Paper on community health services was expected in Jan 2006 – presumably a deliberate smoke screen.

'Incoherent'

The NHS confederation, which represents the PCTs as employers, has described the proposals as incoherent, ill thought out and an incredible way to treat important organisations. Although the proposals have been described as privatisation, this may be too benign a description as it is unlikely that private companies exist which could take over many of the functions. Treating sexually transmitted infections or TB is not exactly a money-spinning venture. Beverley Malone, the General Secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, has described it as a process of Americanisation and has pointed out that 40% of Americans do not have access to community health services.

nt intends to

For NHS staff the facts are stark:

- A quarter of a million staff face redundancy or forced transfer to the private sector
- The document states that the expected saving from the reconfiguration of PCTs, Strategic Health Authorities and Ambulance Trusts is to be at least £250 million and this is to be achieved primarily from staffing
- Current NHS battles around changes to pensions and NHS pay from the employers' perspective will be solved
- The destabilisation tactics have already begun with an instruction to NHS organisations not to fill key posts due to the impending reorganisation.

Fighting back

There is unanimity across trade unions, royal colleges and employers' organisations that the proposals are dangerous. Universities and colleges have condemned the proposals as jeopardising training arrangements and as a wilful abandonment of planning for a future workforce. A survey published in the health services journal found widespread unrest over the proposals with 72% of respondents saying they found them incoherent and 65% found them political. In September, Unison took to the TUC an emergency motion which was unanimously carried, and on 21 September they launched a national campaign.

Despite the national impact of the proposals, it will be the response in the individual workplaces which will determine whether this destruction proceeds. For example, in one PCT in Surrey senior nurses and therapists have decided that the way forward is not to oppose the proposals, rather to form themselves into a private company to bid for the work.

Needless to say, the proposal was not taken to a mass meeting of staff for discussion. More typically, a lot of workplaces are not even aware of the government's proposals. There is an urgent need for workplace and union branch discussion.

WHAT'S THE PARTY?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Step aside capital. It's our turn now.

How to get in touch

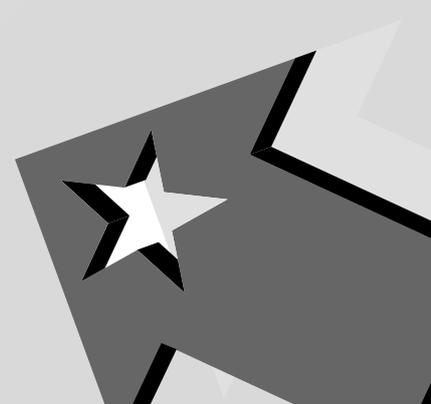
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78 Seymour Avenue
London N17 9EB

www.workers.org.uk
phone/fax 020 8801 9543
e-mail info@workers.org.uk



Back to Front – Follow the leader?

‘Do we still believe that a saviour will arise from the Labour front bench...’

IT IS HARD for the political pundits. Every time a party conference comes round, they need to think of something new to say. That must be the only excuse for the surprise that Gordon Brown is now promising to carry on the “New Labour” programme. After all, he has been Chancellor of the Exchequer for the entire disastrous period since 1997, organising the funding for Blair’s counter-revolution.

And this month Brown is leading a joint G8/European Union “initiative” to Israel and the Palestine Authority. Presumably, the trip will give him foreign policy experience, or at least a foreign policy profile. At present, that profile consists principally of his interview with the DAILY MAIL on 15 January this year, when he said that there were a lot of positive things to say about the British Empire.

The Palestinians will have the benefit of Brown’s advice on how to tackle unemployment and poverty! Given his record in Britain, with a widening gap between rich and poor, they may well be a little sceptical.

If – as seems the case – a clutch of supine trade union general secretaries have been pinning their hopes on a Brown premiership reversing some of the damage Blair has wreaked on Britain, then they will be sorely disappointed.

What, though, of the millions of workers still in trade unions, and workers in general? Do we still believe that a saviour will arise from the Labour front bench (or, indeed, from the Labour Party at all)? That all that is needed is a new occupant at Number 10?

The history of the British labour

movement shows an inbuilt tendency to seek the easy way out. That was why the unions formed the Labour Party in the first place – to do (or not) what the unions dared not do themselves: fight for real class power.

Over the century since then, workers have developed avoidance into an art form. Witness the spectacle at the start of the year of unions organising strike ballots over pensions, in the full knowledge that an election was coming and that they would announce a “climbdown” from the government.

Well, take a look now (see article, p 6). The unions are back to square one, or actually a few squares further back.

Now scroll forwards a few months, and imagine what will happen unless workers organise in their workplaces and in their branches to take the fight to the employers. Leave it to the generals, and there will be strike ballots, big majorities for action, and then everything will be called off because Brown either is thought to be about to become prime minister, or actually has gone into Number 10. Don’t embarrass him in the run-up, and give him a chance while he’s PM. Then, lo and behold, another election will come round and it will be back to the beginning again.

It doesn’t have to be like that. But as a working class we will have to start facing truths that we have been avoiding for a century or more. All reactionaries are the same: if you don’t hit them, they won’t fall. Worse than that, if you don’t hit them, then they will certainly hit you all the harder. There are no saviours but we ourselves.

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