



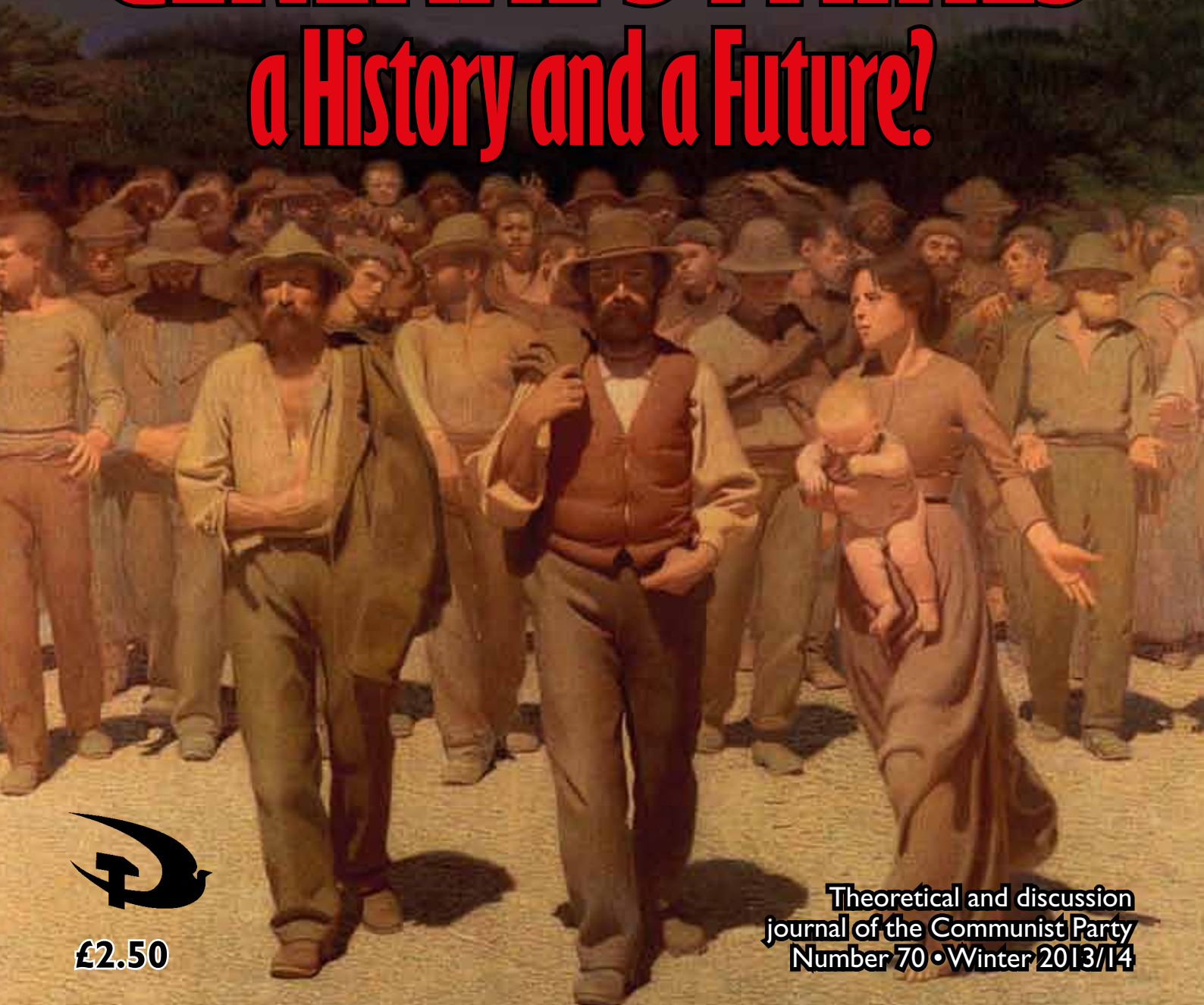
COMMUNIST REVIEW

- **Graham Stevenson** General Strikes – a History and a Future?
- **Round table discussion** Building the Fight against Austerity
- **Kenny Coyle** Korea – Marxism and *Juche*
- **Robert Turnbull** The Plebs League and the Labour College Movement
- Plus Soul Food and more



GENERAL STRIKES

a History and a Future?



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GENERAL STRIKES: A HISTORY AND A FUTURE?

by Graham Stevenson page 2

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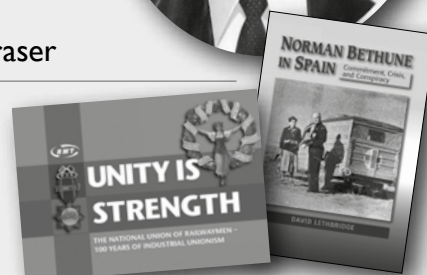
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For contributors to the round table discussion, see page 9.

CORRECTION

We apologise to Ken Fuller for an unfortunate error in his article
in CR69. Page 21, column 1, lines 3-4 should have read “something
that would have been possible ...”

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editorial



By Martin Levy

From *Ah! Rohlihlaha!!* (1989)

by Nogqaza we Jojo¹

“Let him renounce violence
We will release him,” said the wily jackal
“The ball is in your court,” was
your reply.
“For it is you who holds the keys
to open
These doors.”
Renounce violence?
How can I when my people
Are still bound hand and foot,
Their voices hoarse with crying
With no one heeding that cry?
What man has ever sold his birthright
For a mess of pottage?
How can my people begin to talk
with you
When they are held in bondage?
Open the doors so that we, too, may
come in,
Where we, too, will formulate the laws
To govern our land ...
Give our best for the good of our land
Just as our forefathers were wont to do.

The news of Nelson Mandela’s death came just as this issue of *CR* was being prepared for printing. Many tributes have been paid worldwide – and no small wonder, since no media outlet or politician could afford to ignore the passing of one of the greatest political figures of the 20th century. But, with the exception of the *Morning Star*, very few in this country are prepared to state the whole truth – that Mandela was, like Marx, a great revolutionary, and one whose ideas were subjected, for much of his life, to “relentless persecution ... the most savage hostility, the most furious hatred, the most ruthless campaign of lies and slanders.”² The passage from Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, from which that quotation is taken, is particularly pertinent, since Lenin goes on to say, speaking of Marx and others, that

“after their death, attempts are made to turn them into harmless icons, and surround their names with a certain halo for the ‘consolation’ of the oppressed classes and with the

object of duping them, while at the same time emasculating and vulgarising the *real essence* of their revolutionary theories and blunting their revolutionary edge.”

Why were Mandela and the other Rivonia Trial defendants sentenced to life imprisonment? Because the African National Congress (ANC), which they led, had embarked on a campaign of sabotage and other military action, in response to the repression of the apartheid state, which had made traditional non-violent opposition impossible. While plaudits are now being offered for Mandela the peace-maker, and while the apartheid system of the past is rightly condemned, the justness of the armed struggle which Mandela and his co-defendants espoused is being studiously ignored.

Of course, one should not make a fetish of armed struggle. In South Africa, it was part of a broad-ranging ANC strategy encompassing both military and non-military methods, but overall intended to give encouragement to the broad masses of the non-white population, and to bring them into struggle for the overthrow of the system. If the final transition took place constitutionally, then of course Mandela’s leadership played a significant role, but it would never have been reached had not the armed struggle taken place and had not Mandela and his comrades held fast to their beliefs while they were incarcerated and isolated from the world.

That steadfastness in the face of bitter odds should be an example for all fighting for peace and social progress today. Modern Britain is a world apart from apartheid South Africa, and we do at least have the right to vote, associate freely and protest, but monopoly capital is as strongly entrenched here as it was there, and our own working class movement is hamstrung by anti-union laws and is facing an all-round ruling class assault on hard-won rights and social provisions. A mass response will eventually force its way through, but the task of revolutionaries is to hasten that

process and give leadership and direction.

The theme of developing the fight-back against austerity is carried forward in two articles in this issue. In the cover feature, Graham Stevenson discusses the long tradition of *generalised* strikes and the current problems of putting a general strike call into practice, while giving some suggestions for steps along the road to get us there. The second article is something of a departure for *CR* as it is in the form of a round table discussion, covering the deliberations of a national meeting convened by the Communist Party of Britain back in October, to discuss the key tasks facing the labour movement today. The high quality of the discussion and insights stands out sharply.

From contemporary Britain we move half-way across the world to part 1 of Kenny Coyle’s analysis of the *juche* system in People’s Korea – increasingly departing from Marxism, it seems – then back to the North East of England, where Robert Turnbull discusses the origins of the independent working class education movement of a century ago. Arguably, we could do with some education of that ilk now.

In a short article, Lars Ulrik Thomsen calls for a renaissance of Marxism based on a new approach to the relation between the material and the ideal, as developed by Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov. One might recall here Hans Heinz Holz’s comment on György Lukács, that “The subjective factor in history appeared to him always to be a decisive factor, a prime mover.”³

We round off *CR70* with two book reviews and the usual *Soul Food*, now being deluged with poetry submissions – indeed, *A Tsunami Revolt of our Raging!*

Notes and References

- 1 From *Halala Madiba: Nelson Mandela in Poetry*, R Bartlett and M Seakhoa, eds, Aflame Books, Laverstock, 2006, p 153.
- 2 V I Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 25, p 390.
- 3 H H Holz, *György Lukács: A Militant Humanist*, in *CR58*, Autumn 2010, p 25.

General Strikes a History and a Future?



The Origins of Strikes and Scabs

The issue of a general strike has been on the agenda for the last two annual congresses of the TUC, so I thought that some historical background would be worthwhile.

Slave societies accorded no rights to those workers who were enchained but common citizens did combine and act in their own interests. Workers building the Pharaonic tombs in Egypt in 1152 BCE hold the record for the first successful single strike, over delays in pay and provisions.

But the first general strikes were a series of *secessio plebis*, or withdrawal of the commoners, in ancient Rome, eight successful political

strikes between 494 and 287 BCE. Basically, all tradesmen and their families would simply leave Rome for an unscheduled holiday.

During feudalism, workers and masters of trades co-operated in guilds that set them apart from the land-labouring serfs, and strikes as such did not occur. The system relied on mutual obligations; and the most that might occur was that day labourers, or journeymen, might briefly withdraw co-operation, something that is difficult to find in records. But, as capitalistic production expanded, even before the Industrial Revolution in Britain, waged workers began to withdraw labour as a

conscious protest, or designed leverage action.

The strike concept was strong amongst wool combers, some of the first wage-earning artisans to combine. In 1760 they were involved in one of the first modern-style conflicts, which almost grew national within Britain. Six masters in Derby deducted about 6% of the men's wages for their own 'consideration', so the men stopped work. Financial support came from all over Britain; and other workers, such as the shoemakers, began copycat strikes. But the state moved rapidly and five wool combers' leaders were convicted of "conspiring and combining".

Such a heavy-handed, but effective, response

By Graham
Stevenson



meant that in this case it was not necessary to resort to importing strike-breakers; but it is tempting to ponder on the connection between wool combing and the name given to those who would betray their fellow-workers. It is often wrongly claimed that the word 'blackleg' has its origins in coalmining, but in fact it actually originates with a disease of cattle and sheep, characterised by swelling of the legs, that could tarnish wool from all over the sheep. Becoming a nasty name for a betting crook by the 1770s, it was even being applied to cauliflower and potato disease as late as 1880.

But, as a name of opprobrium for a worker willing to work when there is a strike, the term 'blackleg' was certainly employed in miners' songs of the 1830s¹ – although, until the end of the 19th century, most workers used the name 'knobstick', or sometimes 'black sheep', for a scab. Such scabs were people who generally did not work for the 'master' and who often came from far away. In the early days, masters sought what was sometimes called 'unregulated' labour from the local area in a sort of moral test of staying power. Later, things began to get serious.

The actual first use of the word 'strike' for an economic act by workers arose when, in 1768, sailors 'struck' (or removed) certain sails, thus blocking ports, as a political act in support of radical demonstrators. But most strikes were called 'turn-outs', as in 'getting a good turnout' for an event. They would be local, short, and sharp.

The notion of 'generalising' turnouts did not hit Britain until 'Saint Monday' arrived. An unofficial tradition of extending Sunday as a day of rest, this became increasingly popular from the 17th century civil wars onwards, and the taking of unofficial days off for all sorts of reasons was rife by the time that 18th century industrialisation tightened control over working lives.

Trade Union Rights and Political Rights – two sides of the same coin

The idea of co-ordinating Mondays off as a general protest began to be widely aired but never quite took off until around 1832, when William Benbow advocated his theory of the Grand National Holiday, a month-long General Strike that would lead to an armed uprising.

After some false starts the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU) – part federation of existing craft societies, part new union for unskilled labourers and women – was launched in 1834, with James Morrison, the Birmingham builders' leader, as a key figure. Immediately, it put down roots right across the country. The notion of a 'Grand National Holiday' now came back in fashion, as a major strike wave ensued.

At the centre of this development, and three-quarters' of a century after the wool combers had struck, Derby saw a town's turnout – the first sustained localised general strike – from November 1833 to mid-1834. However, this was starved out, and other workers were intimidated by the deportation of the Tolpuddle Martyrs for 'swearing illegal oaths', including seeking to affiliate to the GNCTU.

The working class movement wobbled back and forth, trying first political action, then trade union action before settling, with the Chartists, on a mix of the two. This also heralded a resurgence in militancy and, by 1839, the Charter National Convention was supposedly in favour of a Grand National Holiday, a term used by nonconformist preacher and radical William Benbow in 1832² – but little planning occurred.

Benbow was later jailed for 16 months on charges of sedition for calling for armed insurrection. But key to his ideas was the need for "unity of thought and action",

involving "committees of management of the working classes ... in every city, town, village, and parish";² and this finally emerged, albeit partially, during the first real general strike in British history.

During the summer of 1842, a month's protest 'holiday' was unilaterally enforced by working people. The background was that, of 26 million people in Britain at the time, fewer than a million were entitled to vote. Yet, when the petition in favour of the Peoples' Charter, the demand for democratic rights, was signed by a stunning 3,250,000 people, it was rejected outright by the authorities.

The working class reaction from May 1842 onwards was fierce, if relatively spontaneous. Half of the then entire industrial workforce, some half a million people, came out on strike. The wave of protest started on 18 July in Staffordshire (which then covered parts of what is now Birmingham), and spread during August to the north of England, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall.

There was little strategic leadership, though organised labour and some Chartists around Manchester (which became especially staunch during the strike), Hanley and the Black Country had been agitating for action even before the presentation of the petition.

Workers in some places stopped production by removing the plugs from the boilers of the steam engines that then powered the factories. However, the subsequent dubbing of the event as the Plug Plot Riots runs counter to reality, for a coherent strategy for political advance actually gripped enormous numbers of people. As Frederick Engels noted in 1844: "Something more is needed than Trades Unions and strikes to break the power of the ruling class."³

No-one admired the British trade union movement

more than Engels. "As schools of war they are unexcelled," he commented.⁴ The French, with their revolutionary tradition had it easy, for "what is death ... in comparison with gradual starvation, with the daily sight of the starving family" in the massive and solid strikes of the British working class. Surely, he thought, a people that can endure so much "to bend one single bourgeoisie (capitalist) will be able to break the power of the whole bourgeoisie".⁵ The new concept of 'socialism' was beginning to be debated, whilst the wider Charter demands now became linked to specific economic demands of the strongly organised.

The first all-out striking began with Midlands coal miners demanding restoration of previously cut wages, along with a 10-hour working day, and reduced rents. The strike spread during August 1842 as workers across the north of England similarly linked their own demands with the Charter. The textile industries of Derbyshire, Lancashire, and Yorkshire simply closed down.

The government tried to keep a low profile but, inevitably, the army was dispatched to the disaffected regions. Four men were shot on 13 August in Preston, and some 1,500 were arrested, including most local leaders of the strikes and many prominent Chartists. Seventy-nine people were sentenced to between 7 and 21 years' transportation to Australia. By the end of August most had gone back to work but the Staffordshire miners and the cotton workers of Lancashire carried on for another month.

Political reform began but only slowly in the 1860s – carefully as modern political systems developed and as the veneer around the constitutional monarchy was polished. Craft unions retreated back into their old form and general unions for labourers faded away for a generation and more. The building of the British Empire – and the spin-offs from its



super-profits – staved off much militancy over the next half century, until notions of national and international unions, and unions with radical political agendas, would once again emerge. Meanwhile big federations of unions fell back into localised arrangements (with the TUC being founded on that basis in 1868), with most unions being trade specific – hence ‘trades unions’ – and just for craftsmen.

New Unionism

By the latter part of the 19th century a new wave of workers was being organised in unions. These ‘new’ unions that emerged after economic depression grew at a fantastic rate: union membership rose from 750,000 in 1888 to 6.5 million by 1914. Major battles over poor pay, unsafe conditions and the 8-hour day dominated.

Strike waves generally occur at the conjunction of economic changes; workers strive to hang onto gains, or struggle to achieve them. Academics measure strike potency by the number of days of work ‘lost’, which gives some insight into the measure of past militancy. A particularly sharp phase grew between 1910 and 1914, with some 70 million days lost.

Liverpool earned its reputation for militancy in 1911, in what was effectively a general strike of all transport workers: sailors and dockers, railway workers and many others. The city ground to a halt for most of the summer as the strike committee, chaired by the famous Tom Mann, provided inspiration to all. Police baton-charged a crowd of 85,000 people, injuring at least 350, on what became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’. Troops stationed in the city opened fire on the even more angry demonstrations that followed, killing two and injuring 15.

The railway strike of 1911 was especially sharp, and intense struggles all over the country raged over the next

two years. In 1913, a major lockout took place in Dublin, then still part of the British Empire. The First World War temporarily softened this militant mood, but it began to grow again fiercely from 1917, and exploded once the armistice came. Town general strikes, such as had been seen 100 years before, emerged once again strongly in this period, especially in the heartlands of the new shop stewards’ movement – the Clyde, Sheffield, Coventry, and Derby. Cities dominated by one specific industry were especially prone to generalised strikes in specific communities.

Countdown to 1926

But it is 1926 that everyone thinks about when ‘general strike’ is mentioned. A Conservative government was committed to a harsh economic policy. Workers found hard-won gains under attack. At the time, there were one million coal miners who sought solidarity to defend themselves against the employers’ demand for longer days and lower pay.

Contrary to the blithe demand for a ‘General Strike now!’, the TUC has actually never had the power to call one. In 1926, a special TUC conference of all the executive councils of all affiliates had to be called, not a congress, recognising the autonomy of each affiliate in strike action. This endorsed co-ordinated – but phased – action in support of the miners’ demands, with each ‘rank’ of unions being brought out in succession, building the momentum.

Whilst the General Council was given authority to handle the dispute, most thought this meant that the miners had some sort of veto over any major decisions. Enthusiastically, huge numbers of transport workers – rail, bus, docks – and others – gas and electricity, printing, building, iron and steel, and chemical workers, along with all in coal – stayed away from work.

The TUC made little preparation, even though the government did so for over a year before the strike. Twelve leaders of the Communist Party had been imprisoned to keep them out of action, and the government took control of the newspaper industry and the new BBC radio service. Almost a quarter of a million special police were enrolled, with police making baton-charges in scores of provincial cities. Military preparations included sending warships to major ports and posting troops to all the major industrial districts. The army escorted food lorries from the London docks with locked bayonets and rifle cover. Hundreds of thousands of middle- and upper-class scab volunteers were called in to staff tubes, trams, trains, buses, and lorries, and were given legal dispensation for the many crashes and accidents that ensued. The Roman Catholic Church even declared the strike ‘a sin’ against God; the government said it was unconstitutional and simply illegal.

Thousands of people were arrested for ‘sedition’ in making speeches at rallies that basically called for solidarity. Mostly, these were members of the Communist Party, some also holding dual membership in the Labour Party, still just about allowed. Communist MP Shapurji Saklatvala spent two months in prison for a speech in Hyde Park, where he called on troops not to fire on their fellow workers if ordered to do so. Women communists were jailed too – Isabel Brown got three months with hard labour.

The Prime Minister declared that Britain was facing revolution, and even more communists were arrested. When Soviet trade unionists sent a large donation, the TUC sent it back. It merely urged peaceful activities and tried to minimise the waves of strikers being called out, which were supposed to rise by the day but only did so if local

councils of action organised them. Little could move in and out of many towns without a council of action authority.

After ten days of the strike growing in strength and confidence, TUC leaders declared that they had secured a settlement. Strikers were surprised but drifted back to work, initially euphorically, only to find that this was just not so. Trades unionists everywhere even had to sign documents rejecting unions, amidst widespread victimisation. The miners struggled on to the end of the year but were starved back to work, having to accept the imposed worsened conditions. Some communists did not gain work again until as late as 1940.

What had happened? The specific aims of the strike had not been clear, and not many of the union leaders were in favour of the strike. Politically, there was too much naivety as to what could be achieved and how unity in struggle had to be maintained.

However, contrary to mainstream assessment that it was a defeat, 1926 was a stunning demonstration of working class power. Some two million workers were out at some point over a ten day stretch. But there were not many left leaders of unions at that time, and the TUC was worse. Simply abandoning the struggle at its height seemed to goad the Tories on to further and further hostility towards working people.

Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald thought the General Strike a calamity; he wrote in his diary that it could not “settle (the) purely economic problem of (the) bankruptcy of industry”.⁶ Even after his ignominious splitting of Labour in 1931, slashing its number of MPs, the new Party leadership under Henderson, Lansbury and Attlee projected an ever-more ‘moderate’ stance, making Labour almost irrelevant to the political process until the war



Defend the NHS rally, 1982
Photo: TUC Library Collections

Newspaper owners got injunctions to stop action but ITN was blacked out. BBC TV gave no less than 11 minutes coverage!

Two years later, a common claim unusually united 15 NHS unions, covering a variety of national bargaining units, against an attempt to divide the various grades. Midwives and nurses were the spearhead of the dispute. The TUC co-ordinated an NHS Day of Action in May 1982, involving a 24-hour national stoppage; and every Thursday thereafter locally organised two-hour stoppages took place. Although the TUC asked workers not directly covered by the claim only to demonstrate support on the Day of Action, Fleet Street electricians struck in solidarity, ignoring an injunction. Fines ensued but were paid anonymously. Not to be outdone, Yorkshire miners had three full days of solidarity action!

Since then, there have only been focused disputes. The 1984-5 miners' strike saw around 30 million days lost; however, while there was a lot of sympathy and financial support, no significant solidarity action by others took place. It seems as if solidarity has become something associated only with trade union history.

In a similar vein to the 1979 CSEU approach, a Scottish teachers' dispute ran for nearly 19 months from 1984, after which the Tory Secretary of State, set up an independent committee of inquiry that led to a satisfactory settlement.

The biggest disputes of recent times have been co-ordinated action over public sector pensions. But, like much else, modern government statistics are not necessarily a good guide. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducts its strike surveys in a very different way from other data sets, in that

crisis of 1940.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Party began a slow decline to near extinction. Its leadership had been ultra-supportive of the Tory claim that the General Strike was unconstitutional. Now the Liberals began tearing themselves apart as working class support for them waned and the ferocity of Tory attacks on unions grew monstrous. Forty years of two-party politics began, and general elections became more favoured than general strikes amongst unions.

The Modern Era

After 1926, even to the present day, TUC affiliates have refused to allow too wide a responsibility to the General Council. Unlike most trade union centres in other countries, ours does not have the power to over-ride affiliates other than on inter-union issues and even then only carefully.

Other than 1926, the only official general strike that Britain has experienced

in recent history has been the one that didn't really happen, in 1972. Several one-day unofficial mini-general strikes had already taken place, against Tory anti-union laws. Then the celebrated Pentonville Five dockers' leaders were imprisoned. When an attempt to free them, legally, failed the TUC General Council by 18 votes to 7 (with 6 abstentions) acted to head off massive and rising unofficial strike action by calling the 20th century's second general strike, for Monday 31 July 1972. This did not go ahead due to a sleight-of-hand legal release of the five dockers. However, it was unofficially co-ordinated, and channelled spontaneous strike action that had shifted what were relatively left-wing union leaders into action, not the other way around.

The last four decades have seen many more major forms of generalised action than did the 30 years onwards from 1926. The so-called 'Winter of Discontent' dispute of 1978-9 saw 1.5

million public sector workers strike. Then, in 1979, a 'general industrial strike' of 1.5 million engineering workers, in a series of one-day stoppages, resulted in some 16 million working days lost. The dispute, over demands for a cut in weekly hours from 40 to 35, was steered through by the affiliates of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU), many of which are in today's Unite. While the settlement only resulted in a 39-hour week, this became standard across most industries. More significantly, the dispute proved the virtuosity of a strategy of pulling selected plants out on strike and collecting a levy from all members to fund the strikers' losses. Even today, some £15m still stands in the fund, unutilised.

In 1980, the TUC organised a 'day of action' against Tory government economic and social policies, and plans to introduce the first of several successive pieces of anti-union legislation.



these are entirely voluntary; and details of disputes are picked up from reports in the 'mainstream media and newspapers' and 'directly from the employer'.

The numbers generally quoted for the last big day of action – 30 November 2011 ('N30') – suggest a defective approach, with the action of many public sector workers unrecorded. The survey "tries to record all strike action ... except for those disputes involving fewer than ten workers or lasting less than one day".⁷ Yet, in some cases on N30 a stoppage of only a quarter of an hour took place (effective though that was); and, in some districts, many small groups of workers – like school meals service – were solid. Even so, according to the ONS, nearly 1.4 million working days were lost to industrial action in 2011 – almost four times as much as the previous year and the highest number since 1990. Actually, some two million workers probably took action of some kind.

So, given all we have now reviewed, what scope is there for thinking that more action is possible against the savage Tory attacks still coming, and rising, against ordinary people? Instead of a minority slice of organised trades unionists combining on a single issue, albeit of great relevance to them, such as public sector pensions, ought not the movement to be learning lessons from history? All mass actions before 1978 were about collective concerns, or acts on behalf of groups that needed support. We should get back to that and focus on the overall attack coming from the ConDems, who have no electoral mandate for their assault.

A Generalised Strike with Mass Civil Support for the 21st Century?

What does a general strike today really mean? The 2012 TUC congress backed a motion calling for the

practicalities of a general strike to be investigated, even though all unions know well the tightness of the legal restrictions on the right to strike in the UK. They know that simply calling for a general strike ignores the fact that, if common strike action beyond each individual bargaining unit and each constituent union were to take place, it would still have to be "in furtherance of a trade dispute" to avoid subsequent litigation from employers seeking damages. Moreover, the only right to strike we have is the right to be 'immune' from legal action when in a bona fide trade dispute. Political protests could be legally actionable and, even then, there are the complex special notices to employers and ballot procedures imposed on unions to consider. How does this fit into 'General strike, now!'?

The Institute of Employment Rights has been pointing out for some time – to deafening silence – that the UK is a signatory to ILO convention 87, which covers the right to strike in protest at damaging government policies as well as other matters. Recent decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (not an EU body) place this as part of the European Convention on Human Rights, linking its Article 11 to International Labour Organisation Article 87. In turn, this is backed by the 1998 UK Human Rights Act.⁸

There are several real problems in the way. Just as in 1926, some unions and some leaders are dead set against a general strike. Labour's leadership would be horrified and disown it. Nothing new there! Furthermore, whatever their merits, ballots have become part of the furniture of trade union mansions. Indeed, there is much evidence that employers even wait on the results of ballots before they negotiate. Workers use a ballot to register the most

militant option, to make an employer think again. Ballots have become part of the grammar of industrial relations negotiations.

Can a call for a general strike expect to be heeded nowadays without some kind of ballot? So, what about a test-ballot of the membership of the entire TUC? This could actually be conducted in the workplace, and would at least be better than a petition. It wouldn't be legally valid but the moral impact of a positive outcome would be stunning. Does anyone really think workers wouldn't commit themselves heavily to action? Turnout will surely exceed some of the more pitiful electoral events of recent years, including the ludicrous Police Commissioner elections!

A proposal for a one-day-a-month action, rising by each month to two days, and then three, four, and five, might be considered. The aim should be to force government to negotiate seriously on modifying its social policies, so that there is no deterioration of ordinary people's living standard – which some define as a family income less than a total of £50,000 per annum, whether they work or not.

A ballot of six million trades unionists, perhaps with a 30% turnout, receiving a 70%

endorsement, would surely be a significant development – perhaps not enough to stop Cameron and Co, but enough to send a clear message that people in Britain have had enough of austerity. It would need to be fought for by every single trade union official, full-time and lay. It would mean following through with individual union ballots on a legally valid issue, to feed and match the mood. Despite some sterling struggles, many workers are not straining at the leash to engage in militancy simply because they feel they can't win and because their union and their leaders are too cautious.

Unions need to consider what would unite themselves, their members, and the more than 23 million who work who are not in unions. Only then can we act on issues that might win all and sundry to struggle in unity. Pay, jobs, and pensions are critical issues to all:

■ Cameron attacks the 48-hour Working Time Directive, but it is a toothless creature. Even if it were not, 48 hours a week is too long. If the UK pulls out of this, then we need a shorter working week for all and a job or proper training for everyone.

Further Reading

A good place to look for more information on the history of trades unions is **The Union Makes Us Strong: TUC History Online**, a partnership initiative between London Metropolitan University and the Trades Union Congress: <http://www.unionhistory.info/>.

A classic book, written by a Marxist, which lays out the main outlines and most important turning points of British history from the point of view of the ordinary people is **A People's History of England** by A L Morton. It is written in a clear and jargon-free style and is available from Lawrence and Wishart at £16.99: http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/books/archive/peoples_history.html.

Graham Stevenson's personal website of biography, history, and politics contains an **Illustrated Beginner's Guide to the British Trade Union and Working Class Movements**, which is aimed at school and college students, see: http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=690&Itemid=52.

- How about a compulsory Living Wage for All? In 1891 Parliament adopted a 'Fair Wages Resolution', whereby government departments required all contractors to comply with specified standards. Thatcher abolished the requirement.
- But, above all, we should demand a decent state pension for everyone as the age threshold rises to 66, 67 and beyond. Retirement will be at 73 for today's 33 year-olds, and 77 for those just thinking about university. Yet, two thirds of those over the current retirement age of 65 have a significant disability impairing work performance.

There is no shortage of novel ideas for how to struggle. As a protest, bus drivers in Luxemburg engaged in a 'grow a moustache' fortnight (women could wear a supportive badge!). British bus drivers tried a 'Stop for a Minute' campaign on hours in 2011, whereby they literally pulled over and refused to move. Oxford and Sheffield were especially affected by the Armistice Day style protest.

Keeping the official trade union movement on its mettle will need all militants to work out how to begin mobilising not just existing trades unionists but the bulk of the community, from the relatively young temporary and casual workforces that now run most

of our services to those pushed out of economic activity. Only then will the energy needed to shift up a gear or three be forthcoming. There has been no shortage of campaigns and initiatives but the development of local Peoples' Assemblies, backed by local trades councils and others, could be a good start. If these take up local issues that are not immediately workplace-based, more support will flow.

Maybe a 21st Century 'Peoples' March for Decent Work, Pay, Pensions, and Benefits' – a Peoples' March for short – could lead the way across our nations and regions starting in Spring 2014, well before the run-up to a general election? Maybe Peoples' Festivals of Defiance could be held in the summer, simultaneously in all major towns and cities, perhaps linking them up via social media, or even self-televised networks while the events are happening?

If the movement can manage that, it may well find it much easier to slide into a period of intense managed and co-ordinated militancy. Ideas are all well and good but any way to generate local activity has to come before a call for a general strike can succeed. We could see such a weapon emerge once we have united trades councils, local union organisations, and civil society campaign groups on the issues that worry people in communities.

Notes and References

- 1 See A L Lloyd, *Come All Ye Bold Miners - ballads and songs of the coalfields*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1952.
- 2 W Benbow, *Grand National Holiday, and Congress of the Productive Classes*, republished by the Journeyman Press, London, 1977; online at <http://www.marxists.org/history/england/chartists/benbow-congress.htm>.
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- 6 J Ramsay MacDonald, diary entry, 2 May 1926; cited in A Perkins, *A Very British Strike*, Macmillan, 2006, p 101.
- 7 Office for National Statistics, *Guide to Labour Market Statistics*, 14 November 2012, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/labour-market-guidance/guide-to-labour-market-statistics/guide-to-lm-statistics.html?format=print>.
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Building the Fight Against Austerity

Communists and trades unionists in a round table discussion

In October 2013, after the TUC and Labour Party conferences, the Communist Party of Britain convened a meeting in Liverpool of leading activists to discuss strategic issues relating to the labour movement and the fight against austerity and privatisation. A summary of individual contributions follows.



Participants in the round table

Comrades were speaking in a personal capacity and their positions are set below for descriptive purposes only.

Andy Bain (AB) is national treasurer and former president of the Transport and Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA). He is also chair of Islington Hands Off Our Public Services, and trade union officer of the Coalition of Resistance.

Andy Chaffer (AC) works in mental health and is a Unison branch activist, secretary of the Birmingham branch of the Communist Party (CPB), the Party's national *Morning Star* organiser and a member of the People's Charter commission. He also convenes the CPB public services advisory.

Kevin Donnelly (KD) is a Unite delegate to Leeds Trades Union Council and is regional representative on the Trades Union Councils' Joint Consultative Committee. He also chairs the North East regional meetings of the United Left in his union and sits on the People's Assembly national steering committee.

Bill Greenshields (BG) is chair of the Communist Party, and trade union officer of the People's Charter. A former president of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), he also sits on the People's Assembly national steering committee.

Rob Griffiths (RG) is general secretary of the Communist Party and represents the Party on the People's Assembly national steering committee. He is also a Unite delegate to Cardiff TUC.

Anita Halpin (AH) is the Communist Party's trade union organiser and sits on the National Union of Journalists national executive committee. She is a past member of the TUC General Council and former chair of the TUC Women's Committee.

Kevin Halpin (KH) has been CPB industrial organiser and chair of the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. As a long-standing rank-and-file activist in engineering, he remains keenly involved in United Left and Unite London Underground branch.

Carolyn Jones (CJ) is director of the Institute of Employment Rights and sits on the People's Assembly national

steering committee. She is a former CPB trade union organiser and serves on the CPB executive committee.

Martin Levy (ML) is a national executive committee member of the University and College Union (UCU), president of Newcastle TUC and CPB Northern district secretary.

Gawain Little (GL) serves on the NUT national executive committee and has been president of Oxfordshire TUC and general secretary of the Young Communist League.

Pete Middleman (PM) is North West regional secretary of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS).

Tommy Morrison (TM) is secretary of Clydebank TUC and CPB Scottish Committee secretary. He also sits on the Scottish Committee of the People's Charter.

Kevan Nelson (KN) is North West regional secretary of Unison.

Bob Oram (RO) is chair of the Management Committee of the People's Press Printing Society (PPPS), the co-operative that publishes the *Morning Star*. He is a former member of the Unison national executive and will be working for the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) from February 2014.

Liz Payne (LP) is vice-chair and national women's organiser of the Communist Party, secretary of Taunton & West Somerset TUC and chair of Unison's South West retired members' committee.

Graham Stevenson (GS) is CPB Midlands district secretary, and secretary of his local Unite community branch. He has been a Transport & General Workers Union and Unite national organiser, and was president of the European Transport Workers Federation.

Anita Wright (AW) is secretary of the National Assembly of Women (NAW) and represents it on the People's Assembly national steering committee. She is a former chair of Lambeth Trades Union Council.



Top row: Tommy Morrison, Liz Payne, Kevin Halpin, Kevin Donnelly, Graham Stevenson
Bottom row: Gawain Little, Carolyn Jones, Bill Greenshields, Anita Wright and Anita Halpin



Introduction

CJ: Our aim today is to have a broad strategic discussion. We want your opinions, rather than attempting to tell you, or you tell us, what to think. This is not an intense Marxist education or training school. But, while we need to be strategic, we must be practical too, so ideas about how to implement notions you suggest will be vital.

In recent times, the Communist Party has attempted to harmonise its trade union work with the nature of Britain's labour movement in the 21st century. By 2008, we had moved to a more collective approach to leading our trade union work. We no longer employ full-time organisers to focus exclusively in this area, so we set up the Party's own Trade Union Coordinating Committee. This was initially convened by me and more recently – in a very welcome development – with Anita Halpin in this role.

The time has come to review where we are going, and so the CPB executive committee endorsed Anita's proposal that we hold a round table discussion of invited comrades with specific experiences and roles to bring to today's debate. With a general election and European elections in the offing, we need to lay much greater stress on strengthening the wider labour movement and helping to give it a sharper political direction. I hope today's discussion will do much to progress this and I call on Anita formally to open our discussion.

Political Opening

AH: I start with the assumption that most of us already know what it is that we need to do! The launch of the national People's Assembly has been critical in providing a much needed political focus for the working class and its allies in Britain. Now, with the development of local Assemblies and with significant involvement of local trades union councils, a broad extra-parliamentary movement against austerity is beginning to emerge. To have the TUC general secretary speaking positively at the People's Assembly launch in June, and speaking openly in class terms, was a refreshing contrast to what

has gone on before. But there is a crisis of political representation in the labour movement and for working class people generally.

The greatest disappointment of this year's TUC conference was the characterisation, in effect, of anti-EU campaigners as crypto-fascists – which is insensitive to the victims of fascists and insulting to anti-fascists. Unlike orthodox and doctrinaire Trotskyists and Euro-fanatics, it's not just that we don't think a United States of Europe is immediately likely or possible, whether 'socialist' or capitalist. It's the fact that the EU institutionalises a whole range of anti-working class policies including austerity, privatisation and attacks on trade union rights. The reversal of the Royal Mail sell-off, for example, is probably not going to be possible as long as Britain is a member of the European Union.

What can we do to open up sensible and serious debate within the trade unions? How can we get unions to stop simply following Labour in its unwillingness to rethink the European capitalism project? – especially since capitalism's global crisis underlines the importance of linking up struggles everywhere.

The role of women in the trade union movement is vitally important, and something communists want strongly to reaffirm. The TUC is still ghettoised in terms of who speaks on what – which limits the number of women speakers at Congress. In an age of austerity which seeks either to send women back into the home, or to relegate them to the 'reserve army of labour', it is essential to overcome those who want to turn back the clock on women's representation within the trades unions.

Elevating the publicity work of the CPB in the trade union movement has been a major step forward. Our trade union bulletin *Unity!* is admired and influential at union conferences. But, more generally, we still need to do much more to make or strengthen links between the People's Assembly and its activities on the one hand, and the day-to-day role of trades unions on the other. One way in which we can improve our own work is to share best practice, and no doubt we will hear of different initiatives during the course of today's discussion.

Mass Struggle, the Future of the Labour Party and the Fight against Austerity

KH: The time may come when the CPB will need to assess whether Labour can

still become the *mass* working-class party. Many rank-and-file trades unionists feel that their unions have for far too long tolerated the detached connections that New Labour created and that they must now take a more active role in pushing the Labour Party to support pro-working class policies.

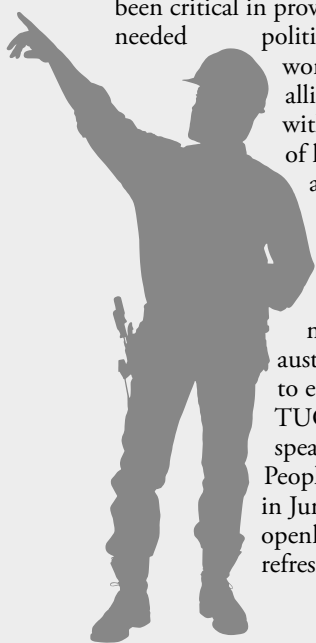
Miliband's proposals for individual trades union membership of the Labour Party will completely change its unique federal character. Unions will no longer have a collective say in policy, and the unique link (one of Lenin's key criteria for Labour to have the potential to be the mass party of labour) will be irrevocably broken. This would be absolutely disastrous when a strong and united movement is crucial to defeating the ConDems.

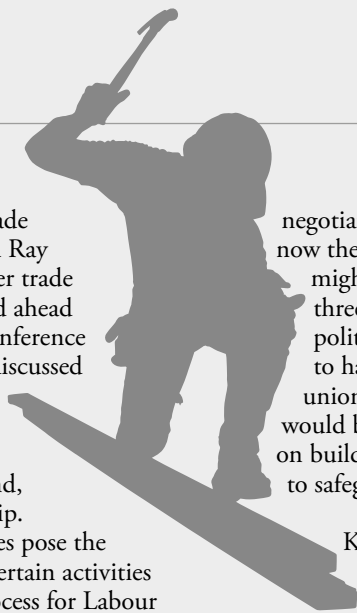
Labour's spring conference, at which Miliband and the New Labour rump hope to break the trade union-Labour Party link, will be just 15 months before the general election. I would say to those who would advocate setting up a new party that all this would achieve now would be another five years of Tory rule. But, in the longer term, and after the 2015 election, the conditions may necessitate – as we have argued in our *Open Letter to the Labour Movement* – the trades unions and other affiliated groups re-establishing a mass party of labour.

GS: It will be important for us to explain, over and over again if necessary, the background to the founding of Labour as a party of the organised working class. Kevin is right to alert us to the current view that is now common among trades unionists. Opinion inside the Communist Party has long tended to fall within either a more critical or a less critical approach to Labour and elections. But our current policy is clear and a well-prepared congress debate will be needed if we are to refine this into any new strategy that's found to be appropriate.

For now, it would be good to see more debate in the pages of the *Morning Star* about both the future of the Labour Party and the future of coordinated anti-austerity action.

CJ: The interim report into Labour's





relationship with the trade unions, written by Lord Ray Collins (himself a former trade union official), appeared ahead of the Labour Party's conference in September and was discussed there. According to the report's introduction, Ed Miliband wants to 'mend, not end' that relationship. However, the report does pose the possibility of banning certain activities during the selection process for Labour election candidates and there is talk, too, of a spending cap on promoting people standing for selection.

Collins writes: "One of the principles that will continue to underpin the relationship is a collective engagement with our party, for trade unions We should not and will not lose that vital contribution. But for too long we have operated with structures which were laid down in a different era."

It is already being proposed by Miliband that any Londoner should be eligible to vote in an election 'primary' to select Labour's candidate for the post of London Mayor, provided they have registered as a supporter of the Labour Party at any time up to the ballot. The special conference, scheduled for 1 March, will see a vote on the final outcome of the Collins Review.

GL: I think it's important to draw a distinction between political representation and mobilising the movement. Consider Unite's *Political Strategy*, approved by the union in late 2011. The aim is that new activists will be organised by Unite's political structures – now democratic – to act as a concerted force within constituency Labour Parties. Maybe that's what Falkirk was about; but if Labour's spring conference enables the development of such an approach, it could be a strategically defining moment.

Anti-austerity campaigning needs to take on board the fact that privatisation of the education system has escaped public attention, unlike privatisation of the Royal Mail and of NHS facilities and services. Teachers face looming confrontation on facility time in schools, especially with an under-reported ruling now that no teacher should spend more than 50% of their hours on union work. In Oxfordshire, for instance, this is impractical. Where once we used to

negotiate with a single employer, now there is the potential that we might have to negotiate with three hundred! Clearly, many politicians do not want teachers to have independent trades unions. A useful 'how to' guide would be one which provides ideas on building community campaigns to safeguard our schools.

KN: Seeing 60,000 people out on September 29 in Manchester to defend the NHS was excellent. What was particularly energising was the range of forces present – students, Greens, pensioners and so on. Frances O'Grady's speech at the rally was exceptionally good, even criticising the EU-US trade agreement for its implications of privatising the health sector. But the question now is how to maintain momentum following the buoyancy of that demonstration. We can't simply wait until there's another major TUC mobilising event some time in 2014.

Media interventions on Miliband's proposed reforms of the Labour-union link which pre-empt collective discussion within unions aren't an especially democratic approach, or even helpful. It's especially galling that local involvement of union branches in Labour politics ended long ago with the introduction of 'one member, one vote'. More than ever, Labour is seen to be an unquestioning pro-EU capitalist party.

AW: I think you can visibly see an alternative growing out of these mass anti-austerity marches. Maybe it's possible that change can come from this, a little bit like the Stop the War marches in the early 'noughties' shifted debate about so-called 'liberal' intervention.

How the trade union movement presents the debate on political representation currently suggests that it doesn't understand it. Moreover, the birth pains of various attempts at recreating a mass workers' party have invariably degenerated into ultra-left fragmentation, which has encouraged despondency.

In its public material, the Communist Party needs to outline what a political force in Parliament and local councils could look like, before we can expect significantly more understanding and support. A problem is how we can relate to left forces in the Parliamentary Labour Party. We also need to define better what we mean by political representation, although much of this

may arise out of the People's Assembly movement and its debates.

AC: What Miliband does is of interest but it would be a diversion to move prematurely to adopt a new political force as a mass electoral party of labour. It's true that the People's Assembly is a natural continuation of the Stop The War Coalition, yet many of our allies in there don't fully grasp the class character of the EU!

It will be more and more difficult to argue that people should vote Labour if local authorities run by them continue to cut more and more staff and services. There will certainly be more fractures inside Labour, which will not aid their electoral popularity. However, we shouldn't be fixated on the Labour Party but on what needs to be done. Once workers are engaged in struggle, Labour will either come on board or not, and that will decide much.

PM: In the wider arena, real possibilities continue to exist for further coordinated action, particularly amongst public sector unions. Any talk about any union's future, including possible mergers, must not be allowed to affect the need to strengthen leverage and build an organising strategy.

ML: We cannot say that the 2015 general election is a foregone result. But the potential for protest to affect the outcome is critical. That's why the government is bringing in the Gaggling Bill. Another aspect is the potential for Scotland to vote for independence. If that happens, then Labour may not have enough MPs in England and Wales to form a government in the foreseeable future.

Ed Miliband's announcements on fuel prices, zero-hours contracts and the Bedroom Tax were designed to offer just the minimum to win support from trades union leaders – in effect he is saying, 'Back me or it will be even worse.' Despite many good decisions at trade union conferences and the TUC, unions still have no real strategy, but rather a set of policies. The leaders will stick with Labour, whatever happens, as they have no clear alternative.

Given that Labour local authorities also have no clear strategy to halt austerity, but are merely trying to wield the axe as kindly as possible, we desperately need a movement that can mobilise a massive number of people to pose political demands.

In the north-east of England, we've



recently had a whole day regional People's Assembly of around five hundred people. Local Assemblies are now focusing on campaigns that can enable people to get involved in an enthusiastic way. But, unfortunately, the level of involvement of the broad mass of trades unionists is not yet as good as it needs to be.

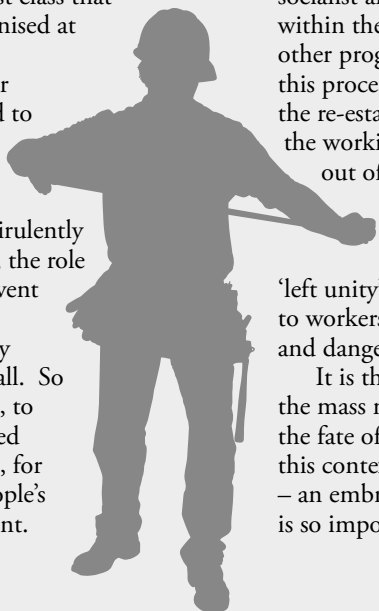
RG: We definitely need clarity in the movement on austerity, that this is a ruling class offensive and is not dependent on any particular parliamentary party.

On the March 1 Labour conference, the CP's position is clear – we are in favour of more trade union involvement in Labour Party matters. It's all too obvious where things are going as far as Miliband's reform proposals are concerned, but will it be a qualitative break between Labour and the affiliated unions or not? Is the *Daily Mail* offensive over Miliband's father the start of a war on Ed Milliband, to be waged by the ruling class?

Calling now for a new party would be a diversion; but after the general election we will need a conference of the movement to discuss political representation. Perhaps beforehand there could be a *Morning Star* conference next summer, maybe called jointly with the People's Assembly, looking forward to influence the Labour manifesto which might be out at the beginning of 2015.

TM: Debate in Scotland on the independence question has, at times, been very suspect. There's no doubt that an agenda for progressive change in Britain would be weakened if it were based on the separate nations. Local trades unions, after political independence, would drift to different priorities and be played off against each other by a capitalist class that is united and organised at British level.

Some voices for independence tend to have a simplistic view of what may be possible, and they can even be virulently anti-Labour. Also, the role of the EU in the event of an independent Scotland has hardly been addressed at all. So there's much to do, to build a more unified all-Britain struggle, for example in the People's Assembly movement.



KD: The TUC's 'Campaign Plan' only once makes any reference to ideology, and speaks of 'flaws' in the government's economic model. Yet it's not flawed for the ruling class! Trying to make local trades union councils fit the campaign plan would be a big mistake. Fortunately, the national work programme for local TUCs is very positive and specifically recommends joint work with the People's Charter. There are some positive steps taking place within the People's Assembly about the Charter, but more is needed.

AB: It seems fairly certain now that the People's Assembly movement has real potential to provide the basis for building a broad anti-monopoly movement. It's in roughly the right political place at the moment. Even if sometimes elements of immaturity get displayed, the creases will tend to get ironed out as the Assembly develops and strengthens.

Clearly, the Labour Party is not homogeneous and the tensions are so great that it does sometimes look as if some kind of break will occur somewhere. That's not a part of the Communist Party's strategy as such, but we do want to see stronger trade unions with more successes demonstrated at this juncture. We should be looking to drive a wedge between neoliberals and old-time social democrats, winning as many of the latter as possible to progressive positions as we move forward.

BG: How we develop the anti-austerity movement into an anti-monopoly movement is much more a political issue than an organisational one. The proposal for a conference on the future of political representation is key, and socialist and social democratic figures within the Labour Party – together with other progressives – will be critical to this process. But any successful move for the re-establishment of a mass party of the working class has to emerge directly out of struggle and from amongst the leaders thrown up by that struggle. Ultra-left or utopian ideas about creating a new 'left unity' party, and then 'offering' it to workers electorally, are just ridiculous and dangerous.

It is the character and development of the mass movement that will determine the fate of the Labour Party, and it is in this context that the People's Assembly – an embryonic anti-monopoly alliance – is so important.



The People's Assembly has asked the People's Charter to convene a meeting of those who want to refresh and popularise the Charter.

Having been adopted by many unions and the TUC, the Charter could provide a core of policies for the People's Assembly movement, around which the trade unions could campaign.

Some individuals and groups have got involved in the Assembly to use it as a forum for promoting their own quite narrow causes. Others see local Assemblies as more of a left forum, rather than as a focus to build a movement to resist and replace the coalition government's austerity and privatisation programme.

So we need firstly to stress the leading role of the organised working class in the Assembly, and from that foundation to focus on building a huge extra-parliamentary movement reaching deep down into union memberships and communities, based on a massive range of formal and informal groups of people right across the country at the level of the street and the ward.

Something else – we need to demonstrate that just about all the policies of the TUC and its affiliates, and all those of the People's Charter and People's Assembly, are expressly forbidden by the European Union's fundamental principles, its 'four freedoms', its treaties, directives and rules. We have to get our comrades in the movement to face the fact that the EU is 100% owned and directed by the capitalist class.

Organising in Local Trades Union Councils

KD: There are 164 trades councils registered with the British TUC, potentially a major source of authority and local presence for any fight-back movement.

I don't worry that there is at times what you might call a 'sense of diminished ego', in that some say that local TUCs are not quite important enough for trade union leaders. Who cares? Trades councils do a unique job, and I think we should prize them more.

There are technical issues about Motion 75 on local trades union councils, passed at the recent Trades Union Congress. But it's important that more motions on the role of these bodies are pushed forwards. Regional TUC executives need to focus more on community organising, but trades



councils don't seem to have been debating this much. We need ourselves to focus on local TUCs and wider campaigns. Some Communist Party districts and nations are organising their own comrades more effectively and we should note that the South East Region TUC has an annual trades councils conference.

RG: Trades council work is important, but it isn't going to be all plain sailing! In some localities, quite a few delegates are not Labour Party members and see trades council campaigning mainly as yet another opportunity to attack Labour locally and nationally. Left-wing Labour councillors are as much of a target as right-wing ones!

AW: Local TUCs are very much an open door, it's always been worthwhile being involved in them. Many local union branches aren't affiliated, but the affiliation fee would be helpful, even if they can't get delegates who will regularly attend. Establishing new trades councils in even more localities is a vital next step and is something I'm now involved with in mid-Wales.

LP: It is possible to improve the functioning and scope of local TUCs. In our part of Somerset, we had a moribund trades council in Taunton. We consulted

local union branch activists and the county association of trades councils, and after three months' work we now have up to 20 representatives from 12 unions.

This has reminded people of the unique role of the trades councils, that they bring a picture of what's happening in all struggles in their area. We are not restricting participation just to those who are formally affiliated, and this actually tends to encourage more affiliation.

Being able to build such a group over many months is significant when you consider that the West Country is dominated politically by the Lib Dems and the Tories. We realised that we could only succeed by building local campaigns and linking them with wider issues such as homelessness and the rights of the elderly.

GL: Any focus on local TUCs must emphasise the need to accept them as an integral part of the structure of the movement. Communists and our left allies promote *Needs of the Hour*, an annual list of draft resolutions that can be adopted by labour movement organisations. It needs to be promoted more widely.

AB: We certainly need to develop the dialogue between communists and our allies involved in trades councils and also develop a similar set of links with People's Assembly activists and anti-cuts groups. I'm involved in Islington Hands Off

Our Public Services (IHOOPS), which works well with its political spread of activists, because of its firm trades union base. For some time, we've talked of this sort of organising, so something should now happen.

Deciding back in June on the 5 November 'day of action' was perhaps with optimism that the fight-back would be stronger by now than it has become. But local groups can easily take action, such as picketing Wonga or ATOS offices. To be more effective in this, the Communist Party needs to nurture a proper network of trades unionists, mapping our base better.

TM: Trades union councils have a much higher profile in the Scottish TUC than they used to have. The STUC is a totally separate body from the British TUC, representing over 630,000 trade unionists in 37 affiliated trade unions, most of which are also affiliated to the British TUC. But a really distinct feature is that some twenty trades union councils in Scotland have equal status with the affiliated unions within the STUC. So the Scottish TUC really does speak for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace, in all occupational sectors and across Scotland.

Clydebank TUC has hosted political forums on issues such as free tuition, bus passes and the cost of



prescriptions, involving Labour and SNP MSPs, the STUC and the Scottish Pensioners Forum. Scottish Labour leaders have been chastised for declaring welfare as part of the 'something for nothing culture'. Our campaigning has reinforced the popularity of the universalism of free bus passes for the elderly, free prescription charges and free tuition. Similarly, Fife TUC launched a new People's Assembly group.

Thousands of ordinary people throughout Scotland are currently being hit by the austerity measures and the cuts that the government is inflicting on the working class and the poor of the country. This ruling class offensive will have a major impact on the health and well-being, both of the people affected, and of the wider community as a whole. For us, this focus is at the centre of all things.

Rebuilding a Women's Movement

AW: Deeply rooted aspects of ideology and culture divide women from men *in a class way*. This gives rise to almost subliminal mechanisms, which operate at all levels and in all nooks and crannies of society – even within our own Communist Party. The big one is that more than half of trades union members are women but the leadership of the movement hardly reflects that reality, even after many positive changes. We now even see a downgrading of equality issues and structures in some trades unions.

There's also a tendency for issues seen to be 'fuzzy', 'soft', or 'caring' to be hived off to women, even though the problems may often be of equal or greater interest to men. Worse still, especially in the policies of some political groups, some issues are shelved off as problems to be solved under socialism, or just on another day. However, women have often very successfully pushed forward such issues – particularly, for example, on health and safety in the workplace – as issues for the whole class.

During 1980s and '90s, the informal 'Left Sisters' grouping – now no longer functioning – was very effective in shifting the trade union movement, and in encouraging and assisting a number of women to take on key roles. Left activists have a collective responsibility to re-establish such a group but with the aim of ensuring

that it is not just leadership positions that we aim to win. Now, bringing forward a new generation of women activists has to be the next step.

The Charter for Women has become accepted in the trades union movement, and the North-West CWU has even included it in a document about organising women, but otherwise little happens with it. There's a great chance to link it with the People's Assembly movement, especially since the fight against austerity is also a struggle against a concerted attack on women in the workforce.

Launching a Women's Assembly under the overall umbrella of the People's Assembly is a real possibility. The National Assembly of Women is a fantastic potential vehicle for more women to become more active and I'd like to see more happen in this sphere.

LP: Women's exploitation is not a moral issue but a barrier to progress, since it is central to the maintenance of capitalism. The burden of doing unpaid work predominantly falls on women. But it is largely enabled by a culture and ideology which demeans women for a purpose, so that they remain vital sources of cheap and free labour power.

Hence images of women in positions of authority are rare in society. Images of women who are not scantily clad or what some think 'attractive' are rare in all types of media.

Even the *Morning Star* can be rather full of men (often ones who are our enemies!) and the women depicted tend to be those in stereotypical roles. I recently counted 59 pictures of men and three of women in the *Star*! Even the Communist Party, often quoted as punching well above its weight, is operating in the featherweight category when it comes to women. A mere one-fifth of our own members are women, when they actually form a slight majority in society at large. We have to make sure that women coming into the movement do not hit the brick wall of sexism.

AB: We don't have strong enough networks any longer to encourage and promote women. This work should also include getting more women to write in the *Morning Star*.

CJ: One third of the union activists invited to this meeting are women but many could not come – some for reasons of family care. As far as revitalising the Left Sisters is concerned, why not call a meeting of those still active and challenge

them to nominate the next generation from their own unions?

KD: This could be important. The current difficulty we sometimes have in winning support and interest in equality issues may mean that it will take a new generation to turn things around, so we need to invest more in this now.

AC: We also need to consider how to unite the various strands of equality activity. Local LGBT committees push policies and motions in unions relevant to specific sectors, for example, but are rarely in contact or even in step with other equality strands. We need to build the links between, for example, the National Assembly of Women and Unison LGBT groups.

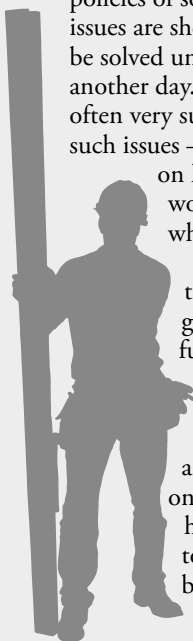
AH: Men need to recognise potential women cadres in unions and encourage them. The Left Sisters network did help new and younger women to come forward, but much has now fallen by the wayside. We need to find ways to restart this process.

Although we have established reserved seats for women and other equality strands at the TUC, such places are all too often allocated on the basis of done deals among unions, with men dominating the debate. Perhaps gender-balanced nomination lists are a way to restart the process. But whatever we do, we need to press unions to strengthen equality structures, not to diminish them.

The TUC may be about to engage in an internal review of all equality structures. The principle of a 50-50 balance, as is the case with youth structures, needs to be asserted. Working with the NAW is going to be vital, since it provides a critical international dimension.

ML: The problems of sexism at large, especially within trade union structures, continue to be very relevant. Getting enough women delegates to be active in local trades union councils, let alone delegating them to attend the various structures within the movement, has become increasingly difficult, especially at a time when there is more pressure on family life.

PM: The rising tide of attacks on union facility time in the civil service and elsewhere is going to have a really detrimental effect on women activists. In my region of PCS, we are now debating holding our regional committee at a weekend instead of midweek, so hard has





Communists in the Workplace

GS: The world of work today looks nothing like what we knew in the past. Only 2% of all workplaces have more than 100 staff. High unemployment, the disappearance of traditional stable jobs and the practices of some unions have made it difficult for many workers – especially those in casual employment – to belong to a union.

Communists have always prioritised union membership as a matter of principle, and indeed over one third of our ‘economically inactive’ members are in a union. But our membership in different unions is too scattered, a trend exaggerated not only by the closure of some key industries but also by the massive shift to mergers and ‘super unions’. This means that a significant organising task exists for the Party as a whole, to ensure that we are connected to the world of work as it now is.

PM: Communists in PCS produce a publication called *RedsCare*, which focuses on the problems for union members in a period of civil service cuts, which adversely affect union membership and density. I’m sure more of such promotional material could be possible for CPB activists in other unions.

GS: Despite perceptions of workplace atomisation over the past three decades, the possibility of some focus remains, where the size of the workforce allows for it. Those sites employing 100 or more staff actually still account for a hefty 42% of overall employment. In Greater London alone, there are still major employers such as British Airways, the British Airports Authority, Arriva, Ford, Transport for London and so on. Similar lists could easily be compiled elsewhere.

As well as ensuring that all their members are in a union, Party organisations should hold discussions around these matters in the run-up to our next National Congress, so that we can judge how much progress we are making in terms of workplace organisation and influence.

■ *The meeting concluded by agreeing a set of recommendations for further work which was relayed to the Communist Party executive committee.*

it become to get an attendance during working hours, as managements simply won’t co-operate any more.

There’s also a weakness in that the PCS Broad Left doesn’t have anything approaching proportionality in drawing up slates.

AW: The Left Sisters need to revitalise themselves, and I’m sure we’ll all do what we can to help. The movement could well be organised much better and a big weakness is that we often don’t decide who can and will do what, when and with what resource. But we can still use the existing networks to get the right people involved. The *Morning Star* could be vital in encouraging links from all parts of the movement to women’s rights’ activities and organisations.

Promoting the *Morning Star*

RO: Given the way that political debate about Britain’s public sector debt is currently so heavily distorted, there has been a tendency either to blame past Labour governments completely – with such assertions little challenged – or to whitewash their record.

Yet the simple fact that Britain’s progressive movement has the use of a daily paper provides us with a magnificent opportunity to challenge the austerity agenda – but the paper’s circulation is far too low. Indeed, despite the *Morning Star* being the paper of the trade union movement, far too few daily sales take place within that sphere. Furthermore, for example, while an increasing number of leading Green Party members support the paper and write for it, active sales and fund-raising in that quarter are minimal.

It is of particular concern that too few people actively involved in the People’s Assembly see the *Morning Star* as a vehicle for campaigning, despite its offices being hosted in the paper’s own premises, namely William Rust House. We need more leading figures to write for the *Morning Star* and many more People’s Assembly groups to promote the one daily paper which promotes the People’s Assembly movement.

Regular columns from all sorts of organisations would be good. We could also aim to get readers from among the Greens, peace activists, co-operators, etc on a particular day so that, say, Wednesday is the Peoples’ Assembly day, or the first Monday in the month is for Co-op activists.

The PPPS is currently reviewing its IT systems with a view to adopting a more activist-focused approach. This could involve the utilisation of

programmes such as Nation Builder, a US community-organising piece of software that the SNP has deployed effectively in Scotland.

There’s no doubt that feminisation of the *Morning Star* is needed but, as you all know, we are already achieving a great deal with very limited resources. Getting more writers and staff is going to be critical in the coming years, but of course there’s always going to be more room for improvement, and constructive criticism from comrades such as yourselves is always going to be welcome.

CJ: One useful idea could be a feature in the paper on how to bargain at the workplace, with relevant information in this area.

A really positive sense of the future is now emerging as the *Morning Star* looks set to be increasingly run by a younger generation. In fact, it’s really surprising how young the *Morning Star* building now looks and feels. A big improvement would be to see a large influx in the flow of information to the news desk from nations and regions.

RG: Up to a dozen copies of the *Star* go into many trades union offices but commonly they stay there on the counters. Full-time officials could be encouraged to take copies into the many meetings they attend there.

We need to discuss how more *Morning Star* campaign committees can be formed in the nations and regions to promote sales, shareholdings and more local news and features in the paper.

AC: The *Morning Star* parliamentary group should be asked to consider whether it can be broadened across more parties – for example, would Green MP Caroline Lucas consider joining it?

RO: The government’s anti-NHS agenda is a live issue, and many people are fighting it, as the magnificent demonstration in Manchester showed. There was much community organising in the run-up to September 29 and turnout was excellent – but there could always have been more. Many local People’s Assembly and community campaign groups could have used our paper more effectively as a mobilising tool.

One worry is the lack of understanding among the general public about the wholesale nature of education privatisation, which suggests that the *Morning Star* could be employed even more effectively by campaigners in this field.

The Korean Ideology: Marxism and *Juche*

By Kenny Coyle



PART I: APPLYING MARXISM-LENINISM “IN A CREATIVE MANNER”?

TWO YEARS ago, in *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance*,¹ I tried to provide a communist perspective on the history and current situation of south-east and north-east Asia. While, in relation to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), I defended the country’s resistance to imperialism, I wrote critically about the *juche* idea and the hereditary succession of power within the Kim family.

To quote from the pamphlet:

“Initially the *juche* theory was presented as a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to Korean conditions. But, especially after 1990 and the collapse of the USSR, this view has been replaced by the argument that *juche* is an entirely original theory, different from and superior to Marxism-Leninism, which is now officially regarded as outdated and limited.

This sidelining of Marxism creates substantial barriers to the renovation of the DPRK, whose economic reconstruction demands ideological and political re-direction.

In North Korea,

the role and activities of the late Kim Il Sung and his son and current DPRK leader Kim Jong Il are exaggerated to superhuman proportions.

In many newly independent countries after World War II, the founders of the new states were often lionised as ‘fathers of the nation’. In the past couple of decades, in the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, Indonesia and Burma, presidents and prime ministers have taken positions held by their fathers, mothers or even grandfathers. Political clans are hardly unknown in the West either, think of the surnames Bush, Kennedy or Clinton.

The DPRK is not unusual in this except that it is the only avowedly socialist state to follow this pattern. The answer to this perplexing reality of ‘Korean-style socialism’ lies more in its Koreanness than its socialism.

The practice of passing leading political positions from father to son has no basis in Marxist theory, instead it

reflects a survival of traditional Korean values influenced by Confucian feudal doctrines, where devotion to parents and respect of patriarchy are considered admirable virtues. Such values are still alive in South Korean society as they are in the North, but the DPRK has raised the ‘cult of the family’ into a political programme.

Hereditary positions are incompatible with the principles of democratic centralism and collective leadership as well as the concept of scientific socialism.”

A short time after the pamphlet was published, Kim Jong Il died and his son Kim Jong Un took on the position of *surjong* (supreme leader), an unprecedented example of dynastic succession in a self-proclaimed socialist state.

In this article, I want to develop these critical points by more detailed reference to the *juche* idea, its origins, indigenous traditional influences and its changing relationship with Marxism. In a highly ideological society such as North Korea, this is crucial in determining how the DPRK acts and will develop. Far from being the

“last bastion of Soviet-style communism”, as the BBC has described it, or “one of the last holdouts of ‘unreformed’ Marxism-Leninism”, as one US academic put it, North Korea has instead gradually replaced Marxism with a unique and quintessentially Korean ideology that defies such simplistic characterisations.²

I want to stress that the focus here is on ideology and politics, not wider issues of North Korea’s economic prospects and the threat to peace on the Korean peninsula. Any broader analysis of North Korea suffers from the lack of trustworthy data available on economics, as the country publishes little in the way of statistics, and even less readable information on its political life. It has rewritten the biographies of its leaders and promotes ridiculous glorification of them.³

Yet, at the same time, the opacity of North Korea is matched by a Western propaganda onslaught, often originating with South Korea, which stretches the limits of gullibility but is quickly taken up by our mainstream media. To illustrate:

“John Delury, an expert on North Korea at Yonsei University in Seoul, noted numerous eye-catching stories in South Korean and Japanese media about the regime,



and particularly Kim, that relied on an anonymous, single source, often from intelligence services.

“This stuff gets planted regularly in media outlets and then quickly goes viral”, he said. “There’s a global appetite for any North Korea story and the more salacious the better. Some of it is probably true – but a great deal of it is probably not.

“The normal standards of journalism are thrown out of the window because the attitude is: “It’s North Korea – no one knows what’s going on in there.””⁴

So, in this article, I want to concentrate on how the North Koreans themselves have

presented and transformed their ideological positions, relying largely on their own words, and ask what this will mean for the country’s future direction.

I. Ideology in Transition

In the former European socialist countries, during the process of capitalist restoration in 1990-91, most former ruling parties were dissolved, renamed or refounded as social-democratic parties, leaving Marxist-Leninist forces to regroup in new parties. This process is worthy of detailed analysis but it clearly does not apply to Korea, where the ruling party, the Workers Party of Korea (WPK), and the DPRK remain apparently intact.

A similar conversion could be seen in three former Portuguese colonies in Africa, where the national liberation

movements had declared themselves Marxist-Leninist parties during the 1960s and ’70s. Mozambique’s Frelimo dropped Marxism completely at its fifth party congress in July 1989, the Angolan MPLA at its third congress in 1990 and the PAICV of Cape Verde the same year. All three parties are now members of the Socialist International. While the MPLA and Frelimo continue to be the governing parties, they won contested elections and have opened their economies up to foreign capital on a large scale. The DPRK does not fit this experience either.

We could invoke the example of the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party turned ruling social-democratic Cambodian People’s Party. As with Angola and Mozambique, Cambodia’s political system was modified following complex peace

agreements with former guerrilla opponents, but its economy is still largely rural and the CPP has overseen a transition to a fully market economy, unlike the DPRK.

There are also the models of China and Vietnam, which have moved from fully centrally planned economies to socialist market or socialist-oriented market economies respectively. Both ruling parties have spent several decades promoting extensive economic reforms while maintaining that they remain guided strategically by Marxism-Leninism. Again this does not fit the DPRK.

So, North Korea has to be understood primarily in its own terms. To take this further we need to look at two key issues, first the specific characteristics of the Korean national question and second the nature of the Korean revolution itself.



2. The Korean National Question

Koreans both north and south are fond of boasting that Korea is a 5000-year-old-civilisation begun by a King Tangun, supposedly born around 2333 BCE,⁵ founder of Old Choson.⁶ This claim says more about the national sensitivity of modern Koreans, surrounded as they have been by the larger more powerful civilisations of Japan and China, than it tells us about the ethnic identity of the peninsula's inhabitants several millennia ago or the character of the societies they lived in. We have no written evidence until the 4th century BCE, when Old Choson and some other kingdoms and city states were mentioned in Chinese chronicles.

One North Korean press article described Tangun's creation of Old Choson as an "epochal occasion in the formation of the Korean nation". As a result, "the Koreans are a homogenous nation who inherited the same blood and culture down through history".⁷

We are on more solid ground if we say that the formation of a distinctly Korean ethnic identity and the establishment of the first united and relatively independent Korean state was broadly completed by around 1000 CE. As historian Bruce Cumings writes:

"Few of the world's peoples live in a nation with no significant ethnic, racial or linguistic difference. Korea is indeed one of the most homogenous nations on earth, where ethnicity and nationality coincide. It is pleasant for the Koreans to think they were always that way; it is a dire mistake to think that this relative homogeneity signifies a common 'bloodline' or imbues all Koreans with similar characteristics."⁸

Developing in the shadow of China and Japan, Korean culture was initially more heavily influenced by China. Some 60% of modern Korean vocabulary is of Chinese origin, and for centuries educated Koreans preferred to use Chinese characters; although a Korean writing system, Hangul, better suited to the language, was created during the 15th century.⁹

Buddhism and Confucian philosophy permeated Korean society via peaceful contact, as well as through temporary occupations and invasions by the Chinese, but these absorptions were largely done in a way that transformed rather than replaced Korean identity. Until the late 19th century Korea was a separate tributary state, accepting Chinese overlordship but essentially ruling itself.

In Japan, by contrast, Korea was the source of inspiration for a whole variety of Japanese cultural areas, such as architecture and cuisine. Buddhism was introduced to Japan by Korean monks; and the migration of Korean clan chiefs to Japan, where they set up their own fiefdoms, seems to have been substantial as long as 1,500 years ago. Ironically the shared origins of Japanese and Korean cultures and peoples became a rallying cry of Japanese racial nationalists and their Korean collaborators in the 19th and 20th centuries, to justify Korea's absorption into the Japanese empire.

The traumatic experience of Japanese occupation has been a defining element in shaping modern Korean identity. Japan's domination over Korea began in 1876, when it forced the opening of Korea's economy to Japan's rapidly developing capitalist industries, eventually turning the country into a colony from 1910 to 1945. Korean culture, language and even personal names were gradually suppressed as the Koreans were expected to imitate the manners and outlook of their

Japanese 'elder brothers'.¹⁰

Japanese colonialists frequently employed much the same imperialist stereotype of the colonised as those adopted by Western powers – the lazy and feckless native. This not only reinforced Japanese attitudes of superiority but also justified the imposition of strict and at times forced labour discipline. One Japanese writer claimed:

"Korean labourers excel our countrymen in stature as well as in physical strength. However, they are extremely lazy. They get up and go out for work only when they feel hungry, but even then, as soon as they quench their hunger for the day, they begin to think about going home and having a nap. They do not know how to save things, nor do they have any will to change their dispositions."¹¹

The forcible assimilation of the Koreans was accelerated in the 1930s as Japan geared up for war and needed recruits for its imperial army and war industries. Japanese became the main language of instruction in schools; pro-Japanese indoctrination covered every facet of life; and campaigns were waged to support the emperor. Collaboration with Japanese colonialism had a strong class bias, being widespread among large landowners and business people; but it also provided social mobility for others, if they were willing to serve in the ranks of the imperial forces. Some Koreans volunteered for their imperial masters: for example, Park Chung-hee, South Korea's dictator 1963-1979 and father of the current South Korean president Park Geun-hye, served as an officer using his adopted Japanese name Takagi Masao.

Other Koreans opted for resistance. However,



nationalist and communist groups failed to form an effective united front and never became the force within Korea that was achieved by their Chinese or Vietnamese counterparts. The first Korean communist groups were formed on the territory of the Soviet Union and in China. The pre-war Korean communist movement was riven with factionalism; and, during the Stalin-era repressions, Soviet-based Korean communists suffered heavy losses.

In Japanese-controlled Manchuria, there was a large Korean diaspora. Here tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans found their way into the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Red Army. It was as a leader of one of these ethnic Korean units during the anti-Japanese war that Kim Il Sung first came to prominence as a fighter. Japanese repression eventually forced Kim's guerrilla units to withdraw into the Soviet Far East where they were incorporated into the Soviet Red Army.¹²

3. North Korean Revolution

Korea's revolution emerged rapidly after the surrender of Japan in August 1945 and the



Mao Zedong 1st Chairman of the central committee of the Communist Party of China, with Nikita Khrushchev, during the Soviet leader's 1958 visit to Beijing

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The first test of *juche* came during the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. Most of the Asian communist parties took a critical line against ‘modern revisionism’ and initially shared many of the Chinese criticisms of the CPSU’s line.

swift arrival of Soviet armed forces in the North, and later the US military in the South. The division of Korea at the 38th Parallel had already been decided by the US before the war’s end. As Japanese rule collapsed, local people’s committees sprang up across the country, often with strong nationalist and communist participation. These were essentially spontaneous grassroots takeovers of government functions from the Japanese colonial regime and its local collaborators.

In the North, tens of thousands of Koreans returned from China and the Soviet Union. Many had served in the ranks of the Chinese or Soviet Red Armies. The future founder of the DPRK and leader of the ruling Workers Party of Korea, Kim Il Sung, had done both. In the South, which proclaimed itself the Republic of Korea in 1948, Syngman Rhee, a returned conservative academic who had lived most of his life in the United States, was gradually elevated to a position of supreme political power by the US. Former collaborators were given a clean bill of health and started to re-fill the business boardrooms and military garrisons.

While the people’s committees in the South were suppressed, and leftists and radical nationalists imprisoned and assassinated, in the North it was landlords, Japanese collaborators and anti-communists who were subject to repression. Since large estates and industries were mainly owned by Japanese colonialists and collaborators, radical land reform and the nationalisation of industry was carried out peacefully with popular support.

Anti-illiteracy campaigns, public health programmes, and promotion of science and technology, women’s rights and so on were all part of a determined effort to create a new modern Korea in the North. This process of social revolution from above and below is well described in Charles K Armstrong’s *The North Korean Revolution 1945-1950*, which illustrates that, although the WPK and DPRK’s emergence owed a great deal to Soviet direction, they both enjoyed substantial popular support. As the new state’s name suggested, the DPRK was classified as a people’s democracy, a form of transition to socialism.¹³

The Korean War (1950-3) saw the full-scale eruption of an already bubbling civil war,

the climax of two competing visions of Korea’s future. Two rival systems clashed, one intent on restoring the old order, the other seeking to mould a new nation. Both attempted to present the other as a creature of foreign powers. Each based its legitimacy on its claim to represent authentic Koreanness.¹⁴

With the exception of Vietnam, no other 20th century socialist revolution was so closely entwined with the anti-colonial revolution as that of Korea. Yet Korea exhibited features quite different from Vietnam. Despite their heroism, Korean revolutionaries had not been instrumental in the defeat of the Japanese. The Koreans had no Dien Bien Phu. As in Eastern Europe, it was the arriving Soviet Red Army that directed the dismantling of the colonial state. In his 1955 speech, ironically where he first outlined his *juche* philosophy, Kim Il Sung referred to the Soviet Union as “our liberator”.¹⁵

During the Korean War, the North came within weeks of defeating the South Korean forces, only to find vicious US intervention driving their forces into retreat. It was then the decisive intervention of China that blocked the US and its allies. The Korean revolution had the Soviet Union to thank for its birth and the Chinese for its rescue. Following the

devastating war, vast amounts of aid were shipped in from the socialist camp. The GDR even reconstructed an entire city, the port of Hamhung.¹⁶ The more the DPRK depended on other states for support, the greater was the Korean counter-emphasis on asserting independence. Armstrong shows that by and large this was achieved:

“In 1954, 33.4% of North Korea’s state revenue came from foreign aid; in 1960, the proportion was down to a paltry 2.6%. By contrast, well over half of South Korea’s government revenue came from foreign assistance in 1956. By the early 1960s, well before South Korea’s industrial take-off, the North had impressively re-industrialized. This difference cannot be explained by foreign aid alone, which was far greater in absolute terms in South Korea than in the North. The regime’s ability to mobilize the North Korean population was also indispensable for the success of this project.”¹⁶

The DPRK made substantial progress in reconstruction and raced ahead of many other Asian countries in terms



of urbanisation and industrialisation until the 1980s, when accumulating economic problems again created a period of renewed reliance on Soviet assistance, so that 50-60% of the DPRK's foreign trade was with Moscow. When the USSR collapsed, North Korea lost its main trading partner and oil supplier, leading to a substantial crisis in the economy.¹⁷ Then, in 1995-8, a series of natural disasters hit the country, overwhelming the exhausted agricultural system and food production, and resulting in the deaths of at least half a million people. The DPRK has still not fully recovered and remains reliant on foreign aid to feed itself.¹⁸

4. The Three Stages of *Juche*

Central to the North Korean world view is the concept of the '*juche* idea'. The word *juche* itself is often loosely translated in Western literature as 'self-reliance', but as Armstrong points out:

"*Juche* literally means to 'rule the body' or master the 'essence' *Juche* is sovereignty as individual dignity, and its loss is shame in a very personal Confucian sense. There is also a certain religious aspect to the way *juche* is used in North Korea with the elevation of the nation, the leader, and the party to a state of immortality and transcendence."¹⁹

As Cumings has also stressed, the concept embodies more than simply self-reliance in foreign policy, defence, economics, ideology or culture. Most countries which have experienced colonial domination have

likewise sought self-reliance; indeed no country would want to think of itself as dependent and relying on others, the concept of a state after all resting on sovereignty.²⁰

The '*juche* idea' has evolved in three stages. In the first period, approximately from 1955 to 1975, *juche* was presented as the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to Korean conditions, a fairly unremarkable proposition. In the second period, beginning in the mid-1970s, *juche* was proposed as an original theory that represented a major advance on Marxism-Leninism, which was portrayed as a flawed and outdated theory. Today, however, Marxism has been painted out of the picture pretty much altogether.

Despite some recent attempts to claim that Kim Il Sung outlined the *juche* idea as far back as 1931, his first major speech pushing *juche* to the fore was in December 1955, and the timing was significant.

First, it was made at a time when he faced a series of inner-party challenges to his style of rule and growing personality cult. The Soviet Union was already undergoing Khrushchev's

'de-Stalinisation thaw' and was just months away from the bombshell 20th Congress, where Stalin's 'cult of personality' came under fire. Until a showdown August plenum in 1956, Kim's opponents lobbied for Soviet support, either to clip Kim's wings or to remove him. Kim was aware that his opponents had visited the Soviet embassy and met with visiting Soviet diplomats. In Moscow, the DPRK's ambassador was so opposed to Kim that he eventually asked for and received political asylum in the USSR.²¹

Second, after Stalin's death the international prestige of Mao Zedong was at a high. Chinese military support had proved decisive in saving the DPRK from defeat by the US in the Korean war.

Kim was faced with both pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese trends within the WPK and *juche* was a means of outflanking both these wings by depicting them as dogmatists divorced from Korean realities.

In his speech to party agitators, Kim Il Sung outlined his stance:²²

"It is important in our work to grasp revolutionary truth,

Marxist-Leninist truth, and apply it correctly to the actual conditions of our country. There can be no set principle that we must follow the Soviet pattern. Some advocate the Soviet way and others the Chinese, but is it not high time to work out our own?

...

Just copying the forms used by others instead of learning Marxist-Leninist truth brings us no good, only harm.

Both in revolutionary struggle and in construction work, we should firmly adhere to Marxist-Leninist principles, applying them in a creative manner to suit the specific conditions of our country and our national characteristics.

If we mechanically apply foreign experience, disregarding the history of our country and the traditions of our people and without taking account of our own realities and level of preparedness of our people, dogmatic errors will result and



North Korean postcard reads: to live for and protect one's country is the greatest patriotism

much harm will be done to the revolutionary cause. To do so is not fidelity to Marxism-Leninism nor to internationalism; it runs counter to them.”

In the same speech, Kim also struck a socially conservative note, complaining that some leading comrades were imitating Soviet manners even in the area of women’s fashion:

“When there are very graceful Korean costumes for our women, what is the use of discarding them and putting on dresses which are unbecoming of them? There is no need to do this. I suggested to Comrade Pak Jon Ae to see that our women dress in Korean costumes as far as possible.”

The first test of *juche* came during the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. Most of the Asian communist parties took a critical line against ‘modern revisionism’ and initially shared many of the Chinese criticisms of the CPSU’s line. The Malayan, Burmese and Thai CPs had adopted a fully Maoist outlook by the mid-60s but a number of other parties such as the North Koreans, Vietnamese and the Japanese refused to endorse the increasingly extreme Chinese positions and steered an independent path, urging the Soviets and Chinese to promote an anti-imperialist united front.

A report from the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang to Moscow in 1966 gives a sense of how the Koreans were changing tack.

“The Korean leaders condemn the Chinese leaders for their great-

power chauvinism, dogmatism, and ‘left’ opportunism. According to statements of the Korean comrades the Chinese do not take changed reality into account, dogmatically repeat individual Marxist-Leninist positions, and drive people to extreme actions under ‘archaic’ and revolutionary slogans.

The Korean leadership is closely following events associated with the conduct of the so-called ‘Cultural Revolution’ in China. In a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador in November of this year Kim Il Sung said, ‘The Chinese want to conduct a cultural revolution

at one stroke. Is this not an example of left opportunism on the part of the CPC and its leaders?’²³

Reading the speeches of Kim Il Sung during the 1970s, there appears very little to set them apart from the standard rhetoric of leaders of other ruling parties of socialist countries of the time – China excepted, as it was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. Welcoming East European leaders such as Todor Zhivkov and Gustav Husak to Pyongyang, Kim usually ended his speeches with the ritualistic “Long live ever-victorious Marxism-Leninism”.²⁴

However, as we will see in the second part of this article, from the mid-1970s onward the *juche* idea began to take on quite different forms.

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Their Swords Shall Not Rust

the Plebs League and the Labour College Movement in the North East of England



By Robert Turnbull

In the last three decades, there has been a revival of interest in the history of adult education, and its subsequent political implications. Following on from the pioneering research of Stuart Macintyre some thirty years ago,¹ Richard Lewis looked at the history of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and its ongoing conflict with the Plebs League, in his book *Leaders and Teachers*,² which focused on South Wales and its revolutionary traditions. In the same vein, the late Eddie and Ruth Frow explored the history of what became known as autodidacticism or working class self-education, through their research in Lancashire;³ and much research has been done around the influence of John Maclean and the Scottish Labour College Movement.⁴

As far as I am aware, the only significant published research into workers' education on Tyneside is *The Right to Learn: the WEA in the North of England, 1910-2010*.⁵ There have been small pieces of work on individual aspects, most notably by Maureen

Callcott who looked at the struggle to establish a public library movement on Tyneside in the 19th century.⁶ But it remains a mystery as to why no-one has attempted to research the history of working class education, and in particular the Plebs League, in the North East of England. After all, Tyneside was the cradle of the industrial revolution; and, along with the likes of South Wales and Red Clydeside, it has a unique place in the history and traditions of the British labour movement.

This article (and my forthcoming book of the same title) is therefore a contribution to our history, but it is more than that. It is a reminder that education is a right and not a privilege, and that the struggle for liberty and equality must be fought in each generation, if the gains made by previous generations are to be built on and renewed. In the North East region, as in many others, we have seen libraries closed, the bedroom tax imposed on people, cuts to benefits, the disabled and unemployed scapegoated and vilified, in some of the most vindictive

and cruel attacks by a ruling elite, certainly in my lifetime.

So how do we fight back? What lessons can we learn from the past that can aid us in our present struggle? What ideological tools can we use, and where is the tool kit? How do we begin that long march from what at times seems like servility, to a society which puts people before profit and which ensures that at least our kids have a decent start in life?

I want to suggest that the long march has to begin with an education that is rooted in the hopes and aspirations of working people, in much the same way that the founders of independent working class education argued over 100 years ago. The one thing that the ruling class fears most of all is an educated, articulate working class which is able to meet it head-on and in the process take its arguments apart. Why, for example, is the general secretary of the Communist Party never invited onto the BBC's *Question Time*? Why indeed is the *Morning Star* never featured on the BBC press preview?

Background to the Plebs League

What exactly was the Plebs League, and where does it fit into the long history of working class autodidacticism in the North East? South Wales had, through the League, great orators such as Nye Bevan, the fine organic intellectual tradition exemplified by Noah Ablett and others, and *The Miners' Next Step*.⁷ Who then were the Tyneside counterparts of the likes of Ablett, Arthur Horner, Will John Edwards and others?

If South Wales was the cradle of the Plebs League, then the North East of England can quite rightly be described as its kindergarten. Many of the independent working-class education activists in the North East Labour College movement went on to achieve national prominence in the labour and trade union movement or in other fields – most notably Will Lawther, Ebby Edwards and George Harvey in the mining industry, and the writer Harold Heslop, whose autobiography *Out of the Old Earth* is an essential read.⁸ Sadly, many of the personalities that appear in my book are today little more than a footnote in history; but I hope that, in writing their story, I can bring the long neglected history of the North East Labour College movement to a new audience.

Ruskin College, which has played such a pivotal role in labour and trade union history, was once home to one of the most bitter and contentious disputes within the history of organised labour, and one whose ramifications are still being felt to this day. For it was there, in Walton Street, Oxford (now part of Exeter College), during October 1908, that a group of students dissatisfied with not only the quality of Ruskin's teaching, but also its ethics, formed what became known as the League of the Plebs. Their stated aim was to "bring about a more satisfactory relationship between Ruskin and the wider labour movement" under the slogan, as they later suggested, of "Educate, agitate, organise".⁹

The Plebs League took their name from the writings of the American Marxist Daniel De Leon, whose book *Two Pages from Roman History*¹⁰ had just been published by James Connolly's Socialist Labour Party (SLP). De Leon recalled the events of the first recorded general strike in history, the *secessio plebis* in 494 BCE in ancient Rome, when a group of plebeians or working class walked out of the city, in protest against their treatment by the wealthy patrician or governing class, and won a number

of important concessions including the right to elect tribunes of the people, with power to veto the decrees of the Senate.¹¹

The parallels between ancient Rome and the founding of the Plebs League were all too obvious for a generation of working class intellectuals who had come to maturity at a time of huge economic, political, cultural, social, economic, and philosophical change. Contrary to popular belief, early 20th century capitalist society was in a state of flux. Underneath the veneer of Edwardian respectability, new currents were emerging in the arts, literature and political philosophy, and these were to have a profound impact on the future shape and direction of Britain and the world. These included Cubism in art, the *Georgian* anthologies in poetry,¹² and the ideas of socialism as articulated by Marx, Engels, William Morris, H M Hyndman, Rosa Luxemburg, James Connolly, Tom Mann and others.

The simmering discontents which led to the Ruskin strike, and the growth of an emerging working class, in terms of political, cultural, social and economic power, found its expression in an educational philosophy, rooted in the materialist conception of history and class struggle, as advocated by Noah Ablett of the South Wales Miners Federation, and others such as W F Hay, Will Mainwaring and Charlie Gibbons, who together went on to write the famous syndicalist pamphlet, *The Miners' Next Step*.

In the North East that struggle was personified by men such as Will Lawther of Chopwell and George Harvey of Durham as well as Ebby Edwards of Ashington. In Scotland and especially Glasgow, it became synonymous with John Maclean, Harry McShane, Willie Gallacher and what became known as Red Clydeside.

The formation of the Plebs League in 1908, the sacking of the Ruskin principal Dennis Hird for his support for the students, and the bitter Ruskin College Strike of 1909, which eventually led the students to secede from Ruskin and set up their own Central Labour College (CLC), was a confrontation which shook the labour movement to its very foundations. The CLC, first in Oxford and later until its closure in 1929 at Earls Court in central London, worked closely with the Plebs League, causing a split in the labour movement which has never really been resolved, between the reformist, social democratic, Fabian wing and those on the far left who advocated what has rightly been termed 'education

for revolution'.

The questions which the students at Ruskin were grappling with, and which they later published as a pamphlet entitled *The Burning Question of Education*, were these:

- What sort of education is suitable for the working class so as to enable working men and women to take their rightful place in the cultural, economic, political and social life of the nation?
- Is education a form of citizenship, a means of bridging the class divide, as the WEA and, a generation earlier, the university settlement movement had argued?
- Is education in the best traditions of Plato, a question that has always plagued Western civilisation?
- What is the good life? What is the good society? How do we achieve that good society?
- Is working class education to be provided for the workers by a small group of paternalistic, often university-educated lay people, or should the working class go it alone and establish their own educational initiatives free from the dominance of the universities and the ruling class?

These questions were brought into sharp focus during 1908, by the publication of a report entitled, somewhat loftily, *Oxford and Working-Class Education*,¹³ advocating much closer links between Oxford University and Ruskin College. The Plebs League believed that that there was no future for the working class while their education remained in the hands of the wealthy and privileged, and so they began to formulate their own educational philosophy which became known as Independent Working Class Education, or IWCE. It was a philosophy which aimed at the emancipation of the working class by the people themselves, in much the same way that Marx and Engels had advocated some 50 years earlier. It was, as the late Professor Brian Simon once said, a "search for enlightenment".¹⁴

In the first edition of its journal *Plebs* published in 1909, the League set out its vision. Noah Ablett, autodidact and a leading member of the Plebs League executive committee, argued:¹⁵

"If the function of Ruskin College had been made quite clear, there could scarcely have been any dispute as to its policy. Everyone





Ruskin College students 1908. On the back row, Noah Ablett is 6th from the left, and Ebby Edwards is 2nd from the left. George Harvey is 3rd from the left on the front row

who is really anxious that the working class should raise itself to an independent and controlling position in this country will be confused on finding a 'Labour College' coquetting with the University They would naturally ask how an institution which has for centuries been the preserve of the aristocratic and governing classes could be of assistance to what is really an antagonistic movement."

Education for "Breaking the Serf Status"

In his study of North East England, Norman McCord writes of the region that

"It was not an equal society, but it was not a society deeply riven with conflict, and this is an important part of the background to the region's economic development, for such growth would have been much less likely in a society obsessed to any marked degree with revolutionary fervour or beset with a continual stream of political disturbances."¹⁶

How then do we explain a working class growing in political power and maturity in the years between 1900

and 1914? The North East's heavy dependence on coal, shipbuilding and heavy engineering bred a desire for self-improvement through learning and the Platonic ideal of the better life, which meant that the IWCE activists as well as the WEA were pushing at an already open door.

Writing in his autobiography,¹⁷ Jack Lawson recalled how he had been gripped by a belief that education was essential to "Breaking the serf status to which the manual worker is condemned." He continued:

"We had great times and I was much encouraged. A group of us, including some school teachers, started an adult school with lectures and a gymnasium. There was also a very good art class. This went on for years in a building made by knocking two colliery houses into one. This, it must be reported, was long before the Workers' Educational Association or any such organisations had ever been heard of."

The broadening of horizons often began through the local miners' lodge, continued through reading socialist literature such as Blatchford's *Clarion* and then went on through a career in local

or national politics. Lawson recalled how, having joined the local branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), he began visiting a socialist bookseller in Newcastle on a Saturday, and began mixing with likeminded people from Northumberland and Durham. It was a road that led Lawson to study for a year at Ruskin College in 1907 and ultimately become an MP.¹⁸

At the same time as Lawson was on his way to Ruskin, his contemporary Ebby Edwards, a miner from Choppington near Morpeth, was beginning his journey on the same road. Unlike Lawson however, Edwards was to become pivotal in the dispute that led to the formation of the CLC, and was a leading figure alongside Will Lawther and George Harvey in the long struggle to establish the IWCE movement in the North East.

Social Tension and "Industrial Unionism"

For an organisation such as the Plebs League to develop, there had to be a large amount of social tension, a feeling that things could not go on as they were, and that a revolution was inevitable. After all, the founding members of the Plebs League were for the most part steeped in the language of classical Marxism and class war. To men such as Will Lawther and Noah Ablett, the idea of

class collaboration was an alien concept. Ablett could not have put it any better:

“We want neither your crumbs nor your condescension, your guidance nor your glamour, your tuition nor your tradition. We have our own historic way to follow, our own salvation to achieve and by this sign we shall conquer.”¹⁹

Perhaps more tellingly, George Harvey wrote:

“The capitalist class is organised as a class with the necessary scientific groupings in such a manner that the whole body of the class can present a solid front able to act together as a whole, as well as in unit parts of the whole. The workers must be organised likewise, or be broken to the level of degraded wretches beyond redemption. Industrial unionism provides the basis of such organisation.”²⁰

So what was “industrial unionism”, and how does this square with Norman McCord’s earlier argument that the North East was essentially a settled society, without any of the social and political turmoil that affected the South Wales coalfield at this time? Harvey goes on to say:

“Because of the fact that the industrial union is based on the war of interests between employers and workers, all workers in and about the mines join the Mining Industrial Union, without regard to nationality, trade or sex, recognising an injury to one as the concern of us all, and acting accordingly. This is certainly better than a federation with scores of unions, each with different leaders and different agreements This industrial form of unionism renders it possible for us to strike a mine solidly from top to bottom, or if necessary the entire mining industry of Britain from end to end. If that will not suffice, we call on other industrial unions to assist us ... in order to defend or promote the interests of the workers.”²¹

This is not a vision of a society at ease with itself, nor is it a vision of a society

of enlightened, paternalistic employers in the Robert Owen mould. This is a recipe for class war on a national scale.

Optimism, Collectivism and the ‘Great Unrest’

Harvey was born in the mining village of Beamish in County Durham on 7 August 1885. Four years older than Will Lawther, and some two years younger than Noah Ablett, he was an early member of the ILP, which had been formed in order to bring about working class representation in Parliament, without having to do deals with the Liberals and other factions. Dave Douglass is correct when he suggests that the ILP was then “more of a movement or platform to which all wings of the working class political movement could affiliate.”²²

The problem was that there were almost too many factions to choose from. As well as the ILP, there was the SLP headed by James Connolly, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) led by Hyndman, and the new doctrines of syndicalism and industrial unionism, as articulated by Noah Ablett, Tom Mann and others. There was also the aforementioned *Clarion* newspaper edited by the ex-soldier Robert Blatchford, selling some 90,000 copies per week at the end of the 19th century.

It was a time of massive optimism within the ranks of the socialist movement, with new groups and methods of thinking appearing all the time. For example Geoff Walker notes²³ that, in February 1908, the SLP managed to gain a foothold in the North East for the first time, when James Macmurrin of the Newcastle Socialist Society requested details and application forms for a possible branch in Newcastle. Later that year a meeting was held in Wallsend attended by over 400 people where a lecture was given on ‘Industrial Unionism’. Prior to this the region had been an ILP stronghold.

In the year that George Harvey spent at Oxford, the SLP on Tyneside seems to have grown massively, with branches established in Wallsend and Gateshead. Walker goes on to say that, by October 1908, the Gateshead branch of the SLP was holding regular meetings on a Saturday morning, producing its own propaganda. As a result of these meetings the SLP seems to have entered into debates with the SDF as well as the ILP.²⁴

The Plebs League can be said to have originated in the activities of organisations like the SLP and the

propaganda efforts of men like Ablett, and women such as socialist and educational campaigner Mary Bridges Adams.²⁵ A strong political focus required a sufficient body of theoretical knowledge, to enable people to withstand the counter-arguments that invariably accompanied any discussion of what a socialist society might look like in the future. The Plebs League itself said:

“Education is and must always be a means to an end. To some it is a means to personal satisfaction, to others a means to a living; to us it is a means to the Great End, the emancipation of the workers. What above all else we need to know is the nature and source of the social forces pointing towards that end and the quantity and quality of the obstacles likely to arise. Thus social forces, their nature, origin and end constitute the general subject of our studies.”²⁶

This was the environment in which men such as George Harvey, Will Lawther, Ebby Edwards and others grew up. Their political outlook had been forged by the common bonds of community and a socialist gospel which stressed collectivism and social solidarity among the working class so that they might achieve the new society of which they dreamt.

The period 1910 to 1914 has been referred to by liberal historians as the ‘Great Unrest’. It was an era of unparalleled industrial militancy, featuring miners, dockers, railway workers, the suffragettes, and also the demand for Irish Home Rule. There were the shootings at Llanelli,²⁷ the Cambrian Combine strike, the so-called ‘Tonypandy Riots’ and *The Miners’ Next Step*. It was the period of gunboats sailing up the Mersey, and of the Dublin Lockout of 1913.

In all of these disturbances the advocates of IWCE played a role, for central to the notion of industrial struggle was that of theoretical education and its relevance to everyday life, and their belief that nothing good could come out of education while it remained solidly in the hands of the ruling class. An editorial in the first edition of *Plebs* was most emphatic:

“If the education of the workers is to square with the ultimate object of the workers – social emancipation – then it is

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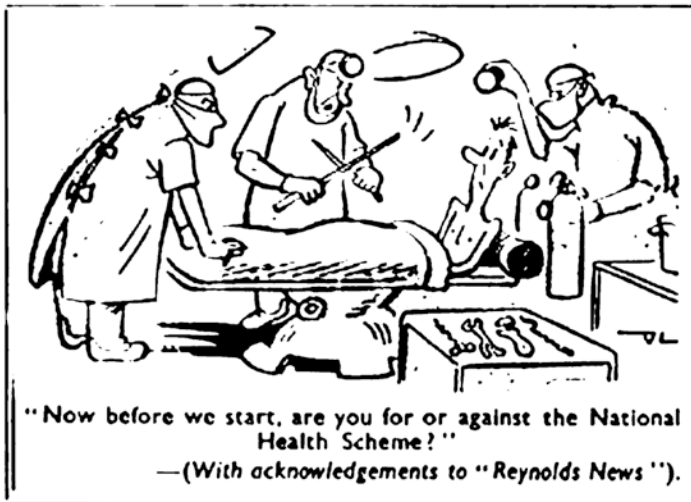
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necessary that the control of such educational institutions must be in the hands of the workers. Beware of the sounding brass and the tinkling cymbal of ruling class-professed sympathies with labour.²⁸

Foundation of the Newcastle Labour College

How the new society was to be achieved, when in many instances the working class appeared – on the surface, at least – to be happy with the status quo, is a question that appears not to have troubled the founders of the CLC in the North East. Writing in *Plebs* in 1915 one G Caruthers suggested:

"It is a stiff and uphill struggle here as all the prosperous institutions and popular personalities support the WEA method; yet we live in hope, knowing that, by our perseverance, the claims of our cause will win the support they deserve."²⁹

His optimism was well founded, for a year earlier in July 1914 *Plebs* had carried a report of a meeting at which the Ashington Miners' Lodge had put forward a motion to withdraw the Northumberland Miners' Association scholarships from Ruskin College and transfer them to the newly formed CLC.

In a lengthy report in *Plebs* the arguments and counter arguments were rehearsed. The main charge put forward by the advocates of the CLC seems to have been the inadequate time to prepare their case; and it was this, together with the falsehoods by the advocates of Ruskin, which meant that the motion was defeated by 42 votes to 21.

The report ended on a note of optimism but bemoaned the fact that the Northumberland miners had not been sufficiently politically developed to make a distinction between the sort of education being offered by the CLC and that at Ruskin.³⁰

The debate was however a harbinger of things to come, and over the next several years the North East Labour College movement grew and matured until it rivaled that of South Wales in its scope and development.

Much of this was due to the work of people such as George Harvey, Ebby Edwards of the Northumberland Miners and Will Lawther of Chopwell, all of whom became active in the North East Labour College movement. Lawther was born on 20 May 1889 at Choppington in Northumberland, of impeccable dissenting heritage, his grandfather having served time in prison for Chartist activities. He was the seventh son of Edward Lawther and Catherine Phillips, and the first to survive childhood. All told, there were 15 children of the marriage; and Lewis Mates³¹ in his study of Lawther suggests that as a result Will was forced to grow up fast.

Like his contemporary Ebby Edwards, Lawther attended Ruskin College, where he was tutored by Noah Ablett, whose influence on his political development was such that Lawther later referred to him as "the greatest prewar Marxist".³² On his return to the North East, Lawther quickly established himself as an able propagandist, both in his local miners' lodge of Chopwell and also within the burgeoning IWCE movement nationally. It was an organisation and a philosophy that was well suited to Lawther's ability at this time, for it was through the efforts not only of Lawther but of other propagandists that the doctrines of syndicalism began to take hold among the working class.

Lewis Mates suggests that, by this time, Lawther was moving towards anarcho-syndicalism. It is interesting to note that he seems to have been in touch with the Welsh militants and that he sold dozens of copies of *The Miners' Next Step* in the Northumberland and Durham coalfield.

So, given that the groundwork appeared to have been laid, it is surprising that the IWCE movement took a long time to get off the ground in the North East. There is a note of a speaking tour in the area by Ablett and Will Mainwaring of the South Wales Miners, who attempted to convince their audience of the benefits and merits of the CLC and of IWCE in general. There are also numerous examples in *Plebs* around 1914 of Ebby Edwards lecturing for free in the Ashington area, on industrial history, for example.



However, it was not until 14 October 1916 that the Newcastle and District Labour College was formed.

At the inaugural meeting, in Pilgrim Street, Newcastle, Will Lawther and George Harvey were announced as founder tutors, and 16 members were enrolled for the class on economics and the modern working class movement. Lawther had appealed through the pages of *Plebs* for as many Durham miners as possible to join. At this point the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) supported the WEA, and Lawther and Harvey put forward a motion to the DMA executive which stated that "we support the CLC in its educational work."³³ One of the features of the early years of the IWCE movement in the North East was the ongoing hostility between the advocates of IWCE and the WEA. In 1917 *Plebs* published a long article from Ebby Edwards and J F Horrbain, as a reply to Mr Mactavish of the WEA, in which they argued the merits of the respective educational philosophies.³⁴

From around 1917 onwards the IWCE movement in the North East

really began to take off, and it is clear from the reports of conferences and the number of classes that there was a hunger for education. For example, the 1925 annual report stated that the number of classes had increased to 44 with a "pleasing increase" in the number of women. An indication of the success of the IWCE movement can be seen in the comment that "The capitalist press has not yet praised our work but is extremely alarmed at our growth."³⁵ Among those who lectured was the notable Mark Starr, who wrote perhaps one of the best known IWCE textbooks, *A Worker Looks at History*.³⁶

It is indicative of the long struggle, not to say drive, of the likes of Edwards, Harvey and Lawther that the North East was able to have an IWCE movement at all. Some of the autodidacts who made up the North East Labour College movement are long forgotten, but the energy, drive and determination of these people was quite remarkable.

Conclusion

I started out by asking what lessons we could learn from the past, and what

ideological tools we could use, to counter the vicious ruling class attack on every advance that working people have made in the last 100 years. I want to suggest that there is a renewed need today for an IWCE movement, and a labour college that is willing and able to train the next generation of socialist activists in the same way that our forebears established the CLC over 100 years ago. The beginnings of such an approach exist in the Independent Working Class Education Network, <http://iwceducation.co.uk/>. If we have the courage of our convictions, then there is nothing that we cannot achieve because, as Shelley famously said, "Ye are many – they are few."³⁷

■ *Robert Turnbull's book, Their Swords Shall Not Rust, will be published by Five Leaves Press in March 2014. The title is taken from the article in the July 1914 Plebs, mentioned above, reporting the Northumberland Miners Association meeting, and suggesting that the CLC advocates would be back in May 1915 for another attempt.*

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- 31 L H Mates, *From Revolutionary to Reactionary: The Life of Will Lawther*, MA Thesis, Newcastle University, 1996.
- 32 *Ibid*, p 4.
- 33 *Plebs*, December 1916, p 246.
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- 35 North East Labour College, *Annual Report*, April 1925.
- 36 I am indebted to Dave Chapple of Bristol CWU for this information. Starr came from Somerset, but Will Lawther managed to get him a job as a farmworker in the North East.
- 37 P B Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy*, Stanza XXXVIII, in *Poetical Works*, OUP, 1970, p 341.



Genocide – or Peace and Socialism?

By Lars Ulrik Thomsen

IN THE *Metamorphoses* Ovid tells the story of Phaethon and his ride with the sun-chariot. Phaethon is eager to show his father, the sun-god Phoebus, and his friends that he can master the ride over the heavens; he is full of youthful presumption. But what you can do in your imagination is one thing; hard reality is another.

Imperialism has developed enormous productive forces, but its ability to master them has long ago turned into a catastrophe for mankind, just as things ended for Phaethon. Imperialism threatens to destroy the life on our planet, so one of the foremost tasks of the communist and labour movements is to strengthen the peace movement around the world. The transition from imperialism to socialism is a just process in the history of humanity.

Perestroika and Glasnost

To understand present developments it is necessary to go back half a century, and look at the changes that occurred in the world community. The *technical-scientific-revolution* changed the relative strength between capitalism and socialism. Imperialism made every effort to gain the lead, using new technology both in general commodity

production and in the arms industry. It completed several metamorphoses during the 20th century that changed the power relationship between the different social systems. At times, socialism and the labour movement had the upper hand, but then the situation shifted and capitalism and imperialism had the advantage.

The intense competition between the two systems was the root cause of the launch of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. And substantial expectations were connected with the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the CPSU. The Soviet leadership hoped to unleash the inherent forces of socialism and overcome both the stagnation that had emerged in the production of consumer goods in the early 1970s, and the devastating red tape in the planning and management of social change. There were great hopes attached to this policy of reform, and in the Western world it became an opportunity and encouragement to the movement for peace and disarmament.

In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the demands for a renewal of socialism eventually led to its collapse. Why did the reform policy not succeed? Because Marxism as a state-theory lagged

behind the development of socialist society. The new scientific discoveries had created the need for further development of Marxism and the application of the new knowledge in many other fields of science. However, during the 1970s a vulgar materialist and positivist direction of the academic strata in the Soviet Union had gained ground. Those scientists and philosophers who were capable of developing Marxism were largely prevented from doing so, through a teaching and writing ban. This is one of the major reasons for the failure of *perestroika* and *glasnost*: the theoretical foundation of the reform policy was not based on Marxism, but rather on neokantianism and positivism, the prevailing perceptions in the capitalist world.¹

The Peace Revolution

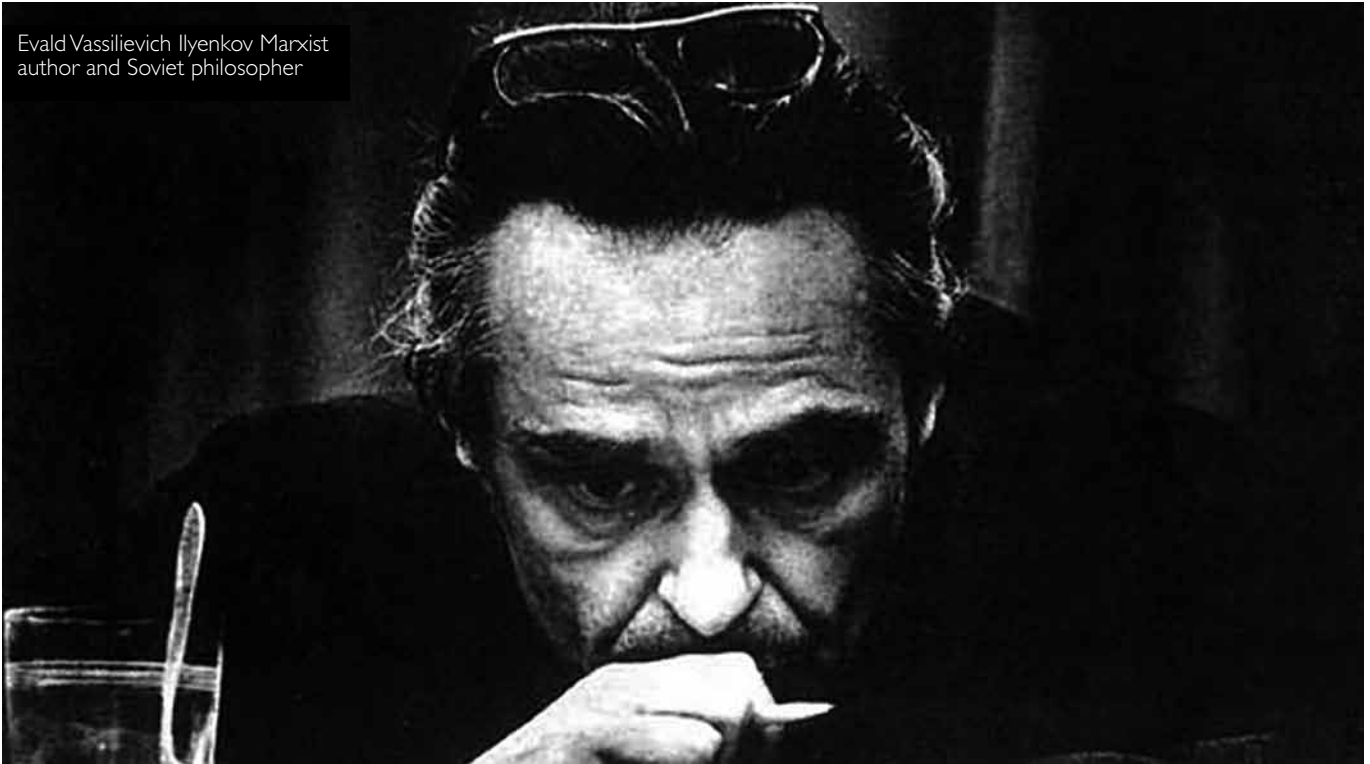
What kind of tasks does the labour movement face today? Imperialism was for decades the hegemonic ruler of the world community; but with the outbreak of the world economic crisis in 2008 there has been a major change in the relative strength of the imperialist powers, promoting the old inter-imperialist rivalry again. This gives socialism and the labour movement new opportunities for gaining ground, and it is important

to exploit these. We must strengthen the debate on how the peace movement can again become a political factor, and thus prevent the world from sliding towards a new devastating war. This debate can only be fruitful if it is able to sum up the experiences of the peace movements in the 20th century. Both the positive and negative experiences must be processed in new discussions, so that the peace movement comes up to date.

One of the philosophers who is a significant inspiration is the American John Somerville (1905-94), who taught at several US universities and was very active in the peace movement. In the context of the events in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the decay of American political life, his book *The Peace Revolution* is of renewed interest. Much of the book refers to the relationship between the different social systems and the prospects for peaceful coexistence in the 20th century. But its significance goes much deeper, showing how we operate with outdated concepts that do not correspond to the latest developments of weapons technology:

“For thousands of years the predominant educative forces within

Evald Vassilievich Ilyenkov Marxist author and Soviet philosopher



the state, church, school, home, arts and society drove into the brain and nervous system of the vast majority of people ... all these positive evaluations, which grew into strong habits and behavioural response patterns ready to spring into action, at the sight or sound of the word 'war'.

Then, after thousands of years [of] these repeated processes and behavioural responses, in the year 1945, the thing that had been called war ... suddenly became an objectively different thing. Why?

Because it could now be fought with new weapons which in objective fact contradicted all the positive evaluations and attitudes of acceptance; because, in objective fact, these new weapons eliminated the possibility of the advantages, profit, power and fame,

upon which the old attitudes and positive evaluations had depended. The new weapons were capable of destroying *everything*.²

A Renaissance for Marxism

In contrast to imperialism the labour movement has the most advanced theory and thinking that humanity has produced. However, Marxism is not a once-and-for-all finished and settled theory, but rather a theory and method that must constantly be able to record the new and adapt it into concepts and categories. We can do this by building on the work of those scientists and philosophers who, as early as the 1970s, tried to overcome the theoretical gap. One of the most talented of those was Evald V Ilyenkov (1924-79).

Ilyenkov's *Dialectics of the Ideal*³ contains a new approach to the relation between the material and ideal. His article gives a review of classical German philosophy and explains in depth how Hegel maintained the advances of Plato, Kant and others in idealistic

philosophy. Hegel was the first to associate the formation of concepts directly with reality, although he presented this as a realisation of *the absolute idea*. These achievements within idealistic philosophy enabled Marx and Engels, in their critical adaptation of Hegel's dialectics, to make the greatest philosophical progress in humanity's recent history, the transition to the *dialectical materialist* conception.

Ilyenkov explains how Marx, through his analysis of the form of value, shows the ideal as an objective reality independent of human consciousness. However, what is remarkable in the article is how Marxism in general underestimated the interaction of the ideal and the material, and thus simplified the dialectics between the two opposing philosophical categories. People cannot function without the ideal – neither as individuals nor collectively – and this is particularly felt over the continuing progress of science in the production process. Ilyenkov emphasises that this does not change Marx's basic elaboration of the value process, as described in *Capital*.

Ilyenkov's article has tremendous potential for a renaissance of Marxism, because we will be able to overcome much of the skepticism that has characterised the attitude towards materialist philosophy in the 20th century.

In addition, it is important to make the works of the classics available to young people by publishing new popular editions, making them understandable and accessible to the masses. This is a major task for the communist movement, for it is only by virtue of the young and fresh forces that we will be able to win progress.

Notes and References

1 Y Primakov, V Martynov and H Diligensky, *Contemporary Imperialism: Analysis, Estimates, Hypothesis*, in the *Socialism: Theory and Practice* series, No 9, Novosti Press, Moscow, September 1990 (last of 3 articles).

2 J Somerville, *The Peace Revolution: ethos and social process*, Contributions in philosophy, No 7, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1975, p 117.

3 E V Ilyenkov, *Dialectics of the Ideal*, A Levant, trans, in *Historical Materialism* 20.2, 2012, pp 149-193.

BOOK REVIEW

A Dedicated Anti-Fascist Surgeon

Review by Pauline Fraser

DAVID LETHBRIDGE'S biography of Dr Norman Bethune focuses on an aspect of the life and work of the legendary Canadian surgeon that has been largely overlooked by previous biographers – his ground-breaking medical work in Spain. The organisation of the world's first military mobile blood transfusion service for the Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War was to be Bethune's legacy.

If this were the only focus of the biography, it would be a welcome and timely addition to the writing on Bethune, but Lethbridge's expertise as a psychologist sheds light on how his upbringing shaped his commitment as a surgeon and a communist, and also his disastrous personal life.

Bethune was born in Ontario in 1890. His mother was the dominating personality in the family: a narrow-minded, ignorant, Presbyterian bigot. She threw his copy of *On the Origin of Species* into the fire. To escape the repressive clutches of his family, Bethune spent a year working as a lumberjack in the far north of Canada, after graduating from high school in 1907. Only when the job ended was he forced to return to the family home in Toronto.

In 1914, on the very day war broke out, Bethune broke off his medical studies in Toronto, to enlist. He spent a brief period as a stretcher-bearer until he was wounded near Ypres. After recovering, he was sent back to Toronto to complete his medical degree, re-enlisted in the navy, and was finally demobilised in England in February 1919.

There he began an internship at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children in London, where he met the

radical artists and writers of the day. He developed what was to become a lifelong interest in art, and it was here that he encountered Frances Penney, daughter of a prominent Edinburgh family, "the woman whom he would love, and sometimes hate, and twice marry", Lethbridge asserts.

Continuing his medical studies in Paris and Vienna, Bethune looked set to become a successful and affluent doctor, who could keep Frances in the manner to which she was accustomed. But their marriage was a disaster from the start. Trying to salvage something from the relationship, the couple went to Detroit, where Bethune worked among the very poorest. Eventually he contracted tuberculosis.

While in hospital at Trudeau Sanatorium, Bethune researched the latest treatment for TB. He underwent a risky procedure that involved inserting a hollow needle between the ribs over the diseased lung, causing it to collapse. If the needle penetrated too far, it could puncture the lung. Bethune's response to the surgeons' caution was to tear open his shirt, saying, "Gentlemen, I welcome the risk!" His treatment and eventual recovery changed his life. From now on he would dedicate himself to helping the poor, as a thoracic surgeon.

In 1933, Bethune became leader of the newly established tuberculosis service at the Sacré Coeur Hospital in Montreal. He introduced person-to-person blood transfusions. Sometimes blood was taken from a donor and refrigerated for a few hours before being transfused. It was only in the Soviet Union that blood banks had been established.

After treating the victims of a demonstration for jobs and food that had

been brutally broken up by the police, Bethune set up a free clinic for the poor where he worked every Saturday.

Bethune saw for himself the leading role that Soviet medicine played in the eradication of tuberculosis, when he attended the International Physiological Congress in Leningrad in August 1935. Children were tested for early onset of the disease, and clinics provided a range of diagnostic services. The Soviet Union was attempting "to develop a society where the health of its citizens would eliminate the very conditions productive of ... disease."

Three months later, Bethune joined the Communist Party of Canada. The situation in Spain was discussed at every Party meeting that Bethune attended from February 1936, when the Popular Front Government was elected. "To his friends he compared fascism to a disease, not unlike tuberculosis, spreading in the same ground of poverty and misery, but posing a danger infinitely more difficult to eradicate," writes Lethbridge. Fascism was also a threat in Canada: on 17 August, just a month after Franco's failed coup, the proto-fascist Duplessis government took power in Quebec.

It was evident, however, that Spain would be the battleground where fascism could be defeated. Lethbridge reports that, in the initial days following the Franco rebellion, "Bethune began to actively consider putting himself at the service of the Spanish people." Following an appeal for medical aid by Manuel Azana, President of the Spanish Republic, Bethune proposed that the Communist Party organise a Canadian mobile blood transfusion unit. This was to be sent to Spain under the auspices of the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (CASD), comprising trade unions,

Norman Bethune in Spain – Commitment, Crisis and Conspiracy

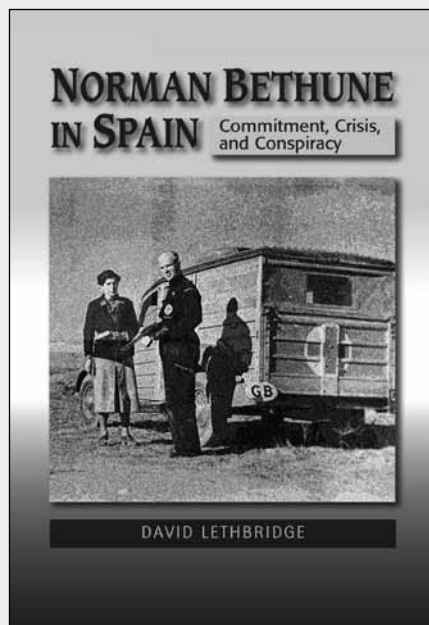
By DAVID LETHBRIDGE
(Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne,
2013, 272 pp, pbk £25. ISBN 978-1-
84519-548-9)

political parties and others. By 26 September 1936, the CASD had already raised over 2,000 Canadian dollars.

At this point, Lethbridge breaks off the narrative to analyse the development of imperialism and fascism. The switch seems abrupt, and I feel the book would have benefited from a bridging section.

Following an exposé of imperialism, largely British imperialism, and the atrocities it committed across the globe, Lethbridge focuses on Spain to show how fascist ideology had embedded itself in the ruling class. He gives an illuminating summary of Franco's attempted coup of July 17 1936. He destroys the arguments of "the apologists for imperialism" who attempt to see the war as a struggle between fascism and communism. Instead, he shows that the Communist Party of Spain saw the Popular Front as "a model in embryo of ... a new and democratic socialism". He includes a letter from Stalin, Molotov and Voroshilov to Largo Caballero, the Republican Premier, in which they state: "The Spanish Revolution is opening up roads that are different in many respects from the road travelled by Russia. It is very possible that the parliamentary road may turn out to be a more effective procedure for revolutionary development in Spain that is was in Russia." These hopes were dashed by the war against the Republic waged by "the fascist triumvirate of Franco, Hitler and Mussolini – supported diplomatically, politically and materially by London and Washington".

Bethune arrived in Madrid on 3 November 1936, with André Malraux, the celebrated French novelist and communist, who had organised the volunteer First International Air Squadron to defend the Republic. He



brought with him medical equipment, including that for blood transfusions, and spent some time assessing the medical needs in Madrid, Albacete, the International Brigades' HQ, and Valencia. On 24 November, Bethune went to London and bought a Ford station wagon to act as an ambulance for the mobile blood transfusion service, which he then drove back, with a companion, to Spain.

He set up headquarters in Madrid and put out an appeal for blood donors. The response was enormous, with donors queuing round the block. On every bottle of blood donated, Bethune not only recorded blood group and date, but also the name of the donor and that of the soldier into whom it was transfused, thus creating a relationship of solidarity.

In early February 1937, the combined fascist forces of Franco, Hitler and Mussolini made a bloody onslaught against the people of Malaga by air, sea and land. Bethune set off with assistants to bring the blood transfusion unit to the Republican forces. On the way, he encountered some of the 150,000 refugees who had been shelled and strafed from land and sea. He never reached Malaga, spending his time feeding the children and evacuating them to the relative safety of the Red Cross Hospital in Almería. This was a turning point for Bethune. He was filled with rage and impatience to do more.

Tragically, it was Bethune's determination to have the whole of the

Republic's blood transfusion services placed under his control – and, when that failed, to keep his unit separate from the Sanidad Militar, when all the military services of the Republic were integrated – that was a contributory factor to his leaving Spain. Bethune was convinced that the two Spanish doctors he had worked with were, at best, not up to the mark. At worst, he felt that one of them might have had fascist sympathies. There was also undoubtedly a conspiracy against Bethune, fuelled by widespread paranoia, in particular, that his Swedish lover, Kajsa Rothman, was a spy. He left Spain in late May 1937.

During the brief time Bethune was in Spain he created the first unified mobile blood transfusion service in military history. This was to be his greatest achievement, but Bethune and his team also developed techniques for the extraction, storage and preservation of blood. Despite the large number of willing donors, such was the toll of battle, that Bethune and the young British doctor, Reginald Saxton, began experimenting with cadaver blood, taken from newly-killed soldiers and drawing on previous experiments on cadaver blood in the Soviet Union. Lethbridge believes that this aspect of Bethune's medical work in Spain is "much undervalued".

While Bethune departed from Spain in unfortunate circumstances, he played an outstanding part in publicising the plight of Spain on his return to Canada, before accepting a colleague's invitation to go to China, where he served with Mao's Eighth Route Army for nearly two years. He died of blood poisoning on 12 November 1939. At his funeral, ten thousand came to mourn.

BOOK REVIEW

Lions and Donkeys: a History of the NUR

Review by Robert Griffiths

THIS IS FIRST-CLASS WRITING about the working class, for the working class, by the working class. It has been published to celebrate the centenary of the NUR, the chief forerunner of what is now the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. Author Alex Gordon has just completed his term of office as RMT president, and is back driving trains. He demonstrates the skills of a professional historian, but without any of the pretensions found all too often in academia.

This finely illustrated booklet – it is halfway between a pamphlet and a book – begins with the formation of the first industrial union on Britain's railways. The General Railway Workers' Union (GRWU) and the United Pointsmen's and Signalmen's Society joined the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS) to establish the NUR at Holborn Town Hall in February 1913. Two unions declined to participate in the merger: the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and the Railway Clerks' Association (now the Transport Salaried Staffs Association).

Without sectional point-scoring, the author shows how at several junctures a single, united rail union would have been of substantial benefit to the workers and their industry. Had this booklet extended its detailed account of ASRS and then NUR history beyond rail nationalisation in 1947, doubtless the point could have been made even more strongly, given the failure of ASLEF in 1963 to test the resolve of the NUR to strike against Dr Beeching's butchery of Britain's railway network. On that occasion, only the communists on the

ASLEF executive voted for united action, against the wishes of their own union's right-wing leadership. For much of the 20th century, however, it was the class-collaborationist leaders of the NUR who strengthened the craft and sectional outlook that predominated in what was often a left-led, more militant ASLEF.

Nonetheless, a union is more than its leaders. As Alex vividly illustrates, the NUR and its main forerunner were often unions of lions led by donkeys – with notable exceptions such as Jim Figgins, Dave Bowman and Jimmy Knapp. On numerous occasions, the members and lower ranking officials fought courageously to overcome the treachery of their leaders, as well as the perfidy of the railway magnates.

In 1907, for example, Liberal MP and ASRS general secretary Richard Bell privately assured the Liberal government that he would accept a conciliation scheme on the railways that fell short of full and proper union recognition by the employers. ASRS members had balloted overwhelmingly to strike for their 10-point National Programme, which required union recognition in order to prosecute its demands on pay and conditions. Workers in all five rail unions soon realised that the conciliation scheme, cooked up by Board of Trade president David Lloyd George and the rail company bosses, was a dead-end 'alternative' to recognition and collective bargaining. In the ASRS, where branch secretary (and Liberal Party supporter) W V Osborne had won a Law Lords ruling to ban the use of the union's political levy to fund the Labour Party, activists turned on Bell, who was forced to resign as general secretary in 1909. Unfortunately,

the real power in the union then passed to assistant general secretary J H ('Jimmy') Thomas.

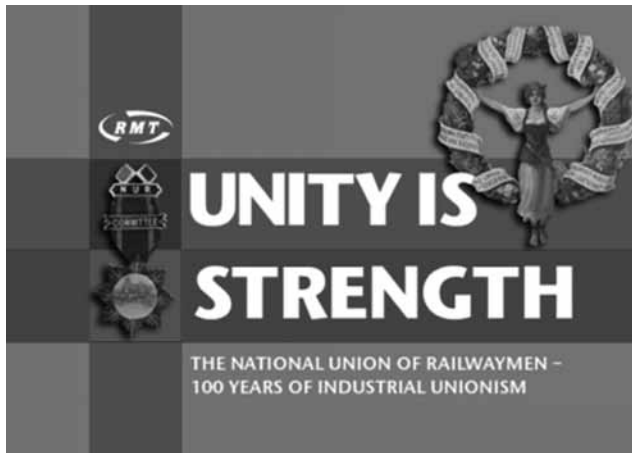
Against a background of national and local strikes in the coal, transport, docks and seafaring industries, and unofficial action on the railways, the five rail unions launched their own all-out strike in August 1911. Again, after a magnificent response from railway workers, the result was a duplicitous compromise. A Royal Commission later proposed a new arbitration and conciliation scheme which included a form of secondary union recognition.

The booklet's author describes the main events and consequences concisely and in lively fashion, although the momentous episode of 1911 in Llanelli surely deserves more than the paragraph given. On August 19 of that year, British troops shot dead two spectators and wounded two more as crowds laid siege to trains just outside Llanelli station, on the mainline between London, Fishguard and Ireland. Four more people died in an explosion as tinsplate workers and miners fought pitched battles with the police.¹ This has so far proved to be the last occasion in Britain when the military opened fire on workers in an industrial dispute.

Out of the 1911 strike came the merger to create the NUR, together with the new union's participation in a Triple Alliance with other transport workers and the miners. Understandably, Alex covers this historic development in some detail, and in typically racy style. This includes the victory won by the proponents of syndicalism – revolutionary trade unionism – when they inserted a clause in the new rule book allowing railway workers from every grade and section to

Unity is Strength: the National Union of Railwaymen – 100 Years of Industrial Unionism

By ALEX GORDON
(RMT, 2012, 72pp.
pbk, £3. ISBN 978-1-904260-110)



join the National Union of Railwaymen. However, former GRWU leader Tom Lowth had been less successful when proposing that the new union's title refer to "workers" rather than "men", to take account of his women members. The promises made to Lowth, that the new union would enrol women were betrayed, until rank-and-file branches overturned their leaders and redeemed the pledge in 1915.

Fittingly, Alex recounts the story of the 1913 Dublin lock-out of transport workers, when NUR and ASLEF members engaged in two huge waves of unofficial solidarity action. Not for the first time, J H Thomas played a despicable role in trying to undermine the movement; and, yet again, his infamy is exposed by the author.

The struggles of the NUR and its members, against wartime 'dilution', for postwar 'standardisation upwards' (when ASLEF launched vital solidarity

action), during the 1926 General Strike, and for rail nationalisation are all reported in lively style. Nor is the major part played by the ASRS and the NUR in the politics of the labour movement neglected, although the struggle against Blackshirt fascism in the 1930s is. The ASRS proposed the TUC resolution in 1899 which led to the formation of the Labour Representation Committee and, in turn, the Labour Party. Together with the South Wales Miners Federation, it helped found the Central Labour College, following the Marxist-inspired Ruskin College strike of 1909.

But, skating through these brief chapters reminded me of the true story I heard a few years ago about a meeting of a Trotskyist organisation. The local full-timer had just delivered a eulogy on the latest book by the sect's guru. A potential recruit in the audience expressed due enthusiasm for buying a

copy, but asked the speaker whether – on reflection – he couldn't think of a single point of criticism, however small. Panic-stricken and conscious of the need to impress the likely new convert, the mini-guru stammered a little before replying, with the firmness of apparent conviction: "Yes, I do indeed have a criticism of the book – it should have been longer."

I was not that Trotskyist critic, but his criticism is the biggest one I can make of Alex Gordon's excellent booklet. Let's hope that a sequel will soon be produced covering the post-war decades in more detail.

Notes and References

1 A superb illustrated booklet about the events has recently been published by the 1911 Llanelli Railway Strike Commemoration Committee. For further information contact the secretary, John Willock, 57 Tirgoch, Llangennech, Llanelli SA14 8TP, tel 01554 820736.

Junk food: an irregular cartoon strip





SOULFOOD

A regular literary selection

Selected by Mike Quille

THE TSUNAMI REVOLT OF OUR RAGING



Careful and attentive readers of this column – and could there be any other kind? – will recall how, several issues ago, I expressed the hope that one day I would be in the enviable position of the editor of the *Northern Star* in 1838. William Hill was inundated by poetry from his Chartist readers, and was rather ungrateful in his reaction:

“We get Rhymes of a most rubbishly description by the score. We cannot pretend to enumerate them. We shall select, from time to time, such as we think are worth publishing, and burn the rest.”¹

Since the last *Soul Food* column, containing the long extract from Alan Morrison’s new poem, a large number of poems have been sent in, many more than can be published immediately. Perhaps, as the *CR* editor suggested in his last editorial, we are witnessing the same kind of political ferment amongst writers as occurred in the Thirties? Whatever the reason, I certainly shall not be burning any poems: they will all be kept for possible future publication.

Let’s start with a rallying cry for the New Year, from John G Hall. It’s an uncompromisingly public poem, demanding an audience. It should be declaimed aloud, to appreciate the passion and unstoppable revolutionary force, the “tsunami revolt” as he calls it, expressed in the increasingly urgent rhythm. Otherwise you’ll just get angry with yourself!

Read it at home, at branch meetings, at People’s Assembly meetings. For those of you unfortunate enough to live in London and the South East, read it out on the overcrowded trains.

2014 time to stop whispering

by John G Hall

<p>2014 is timed to be the year of the great switch on of our left over rage and protest, rich men will come to squeeze your hearts more dry than burning sand, will come to smash all the love in you, but this will be the brilliant time the lovers time, the underground rising up through our feet up into our legs up into our sex up into our hearts up into our minds, up into our tongues up into the breath we exchange each kiss we freely give this year, this year. We will write a red unholy bible book filled with dreams coming true hot off the page, and everything will begin with the word awake</p>	<p>on the barricade, made into flesh made into roar, made up to make love to everything an inconsumable system of human touch enshrined in the helix twists of the revolution's unborn children, snuggled curled waiting in our present lily livered silence, time to wake up to energise each par sec of your heart beat and be beat and be beat and be the bow wave tsunami revolt of our raging smashing up, their thirty dirty pieces of peace, let us be their poison chalice, their cursed wine their bitter host their winter palace.</p>
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After that rousing start, you may now sit down for this more sober and reflective poem, from Kevin Higgins.

Austerity Mantra

By Kevin Higgins

Everything must be on the table.
Your ninety seven year old granny
is no longer cost effective, would
benefit greatly from being brought face to face
with a compassionate baseball bat.
The figures speak for themselves and will
be worse by morning. The paraplegic
in his insanely expensive wheelchair
will have to crawl as God intended.
Here are the figures that won't stop
speaking for themselves, this is the table
everything must be on. Yesterday my name was
Temporary Fiscal Adjustment.

Tonight, the insect in the radio calls me
The Inevitable. When the economist
puts his hand up, take care not to cough.
Everything's on the table and
the table's tiny. I'd send you a pillow
to hold hard over the child's face
'til the kicking stops, but at current rates
there'll be no pillow. I am the unthinkable
but you will think me. Pack her mouth
with tea towels, hold down firmly
your old mildewed raincoat,
'til there's no more breath.

Tomorrow I'll be known as
Four Year Consolidation Package.
Lock the cat in the oven and bake
at two hundred degrees centigrade.
Tie your last plastic bag over
your own head. The figures speak for
themselves
and there is no table.

I can't better the description of Kevin's poetry by
Clare Daly TD as

"a really good and provocative read. It will
jolt you; it will certainly touch you; make
you laugh; maybe make you snarl a little bit
as well, depending on where you come from
or what your background is."²

Continuing the theme of poems about
austerity, here's one from Kevin Saving. It's
reminiscent of some of T S Eliot's shorter poems,
with its neat, even rhyming and precise diction,
which point up the paradoxes and contradictions
of the scenes depicted.

The Fall of Rome

by Kevin Saving

The Coliseum's strange delights
play, nightly, to the masses:
strutting divas, catamites
and culinary classes.

As the watch send out for back-up
while a mugger flees the scene;
as the (unpaid) taxes stack up
on the Prefect's quinquereme;

as two censors knock upon a door
whose 'details' have been sold
(though Mr Plebus, eighty-four,
sits huddled in the cold)

and the Senate's guard-dogs bark – one nips
his handler – tugging chains,
bronzed, laureated Caesar sips
fine wines, above fouled drains.

To vary the tone, here's a short but deceptively
skilful squib from Tim Richards:



Paper Work

by Tim Richards

If paper work
proves on paper
that proper work
has provided work
for paper-pushers,
how much paperwork
should proper workers
provide to paper-pushers
to prove they are proper workers
and to provide them with work?

Next, two poems about armed conflict. The first is from Judith Kazantzis. The vividness and eloquence of this poem is announced by the first word, 'crunched', where you might expect 'crouched', thus simultaneously suggesting the drone's effect as well as its threat.

On Terror

by Judith Kazantzis

Crunched behind a bush
30 metres back, he hoists
the blindfire rocket,
all he's got.

Watches the drones coming
steadily in steel droves
automated sheep skipping
high over the wire –

Up and just about over – .
Headfirst it ploughs a field.
Back a bit, the wolves press the
buttons
of the sheep, and drink coffee.

He squirms at night.
Rearms from a small cache.
Terror in a cellar ...
On return they glide and dock in
hangars.

The second one is from Alan Dunnett. Note the way the punctuation and line breaks create pauses in lines 1 and 3, which are then echoed at the end, evoking the sense of impending explosion.

Atrocity

by Alan Dunnett

This was after the shops had closed.
I knew
at once that the empty streets
would never
be filled again. I thought for a
moment

that I could hear the breathing of
all those
who had passed by today and
yesterday
and all the days narrowing back in
time.

I knew those days had taken place
and that
the memory of an exhalation,
the last one, remained in the air's
stillness,

invisible but present, arrested,
falling into oblivion only
at the dark point of
eradication

which was yet to come and when
it did,
even then there would be a trace
of bones
made into fine, pre-Etruscan dust

long dispelled but not in the hearts
of men
forgotten, though you might think
so. You kill
me but I am not dead. I speak to
you now.

Finally we return to the optimism of our opening poem, with a lapidary, Brechtian submission from Keith Armstrong.

After the UK

by Keith Armstrong

Shreds of the UK
flapping in the downturn,
decayed Britain
broken into smithereens.
No Kingdom now,
no United State.
We are
citizens
with no obligation
to genuflect
in front of an overstuffed Queen.

Get the UK out of your system,
no going back.
We take the power
to rule ourselves,
make community,
build our own spaces.
Break
the hegemony
of dead parties,
lifeless institutions,
let debate flower,
conflicting views rage.

We want to breathe
and strip away
executive power,
share
the beauty and culture
of these islands
around.
Make good things,
good love.
Empower ourselves
with an autonomous freedom
in a new England,
in a new Europe,
in a New World
of real ownership
and delicate emotion.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the poets who contributed such fine poems for us to read (and declaim). Some brief details on the writers:

John G Hall is an activist and poetry workshop organiser based in Manchester, founding editor of *Citizen 32* and a contributor to numerous poetry publications.

Kevin Higgins is a poet, essayist and reviewer, and has published several books.

Kevin Saving is a poet and trained nurse based in Winslow, and has published his poems in newspapers, chapbooks, and an e-book.

Tim Richards is a published poet and

member of the Welsh 'Red Poets' collective.

Judith Kazantzis has spent most of her adult life between London and Florida, and has published ten books of poetry.

Alan Dunnett is a published poet, film maker, lecturer and trade union activist, based in London.

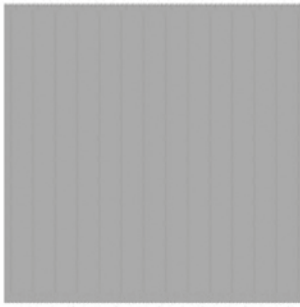
Keith Armstrong is a community development worker, poet, librarian, editor, arts festival organiser and publisher, based in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Please continue to send poems to
artseditor@communistreview.org.uk.

Notes and References

1 From the *Northern Star* of 22 December 1838, quoted in M Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p 72.

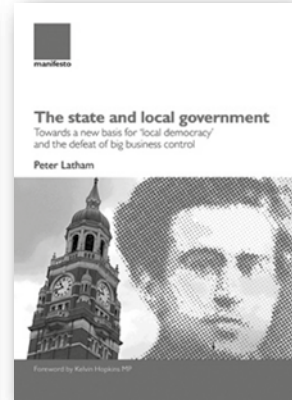
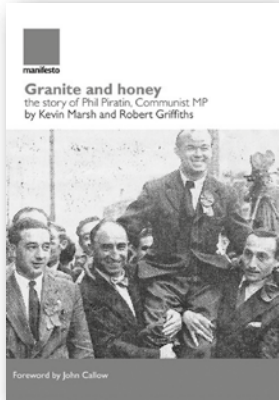
2 Speech by Clare Daly TD at the Dublin launch of Kevin Higgins' *Mentioning the War*, in *Irish Left Review*, 12 June 2012; online at <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2012/06/12/speech-clare-daly-td-dublin-launch-kevin-higgins-mentioning-war/#sthash.E8ovlBDp.dpuf>.



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