

SOCIALIST APPEAL

UNISON BULLETIN

ISSUE 4

BALLOTS, STRIKES AND CLASS STRUGGLE TIME TO TOPPLE THE TORIES!

UNISON Socialist

Appeal Supporters

UNISON's young activists are gathering in Bournemouth for this year's Young Members Conference, and with everything that is going on there will certainly be plenty to discuss.

The cost of living crisis is becoming more serious every day, and young people are at the sharp end of it. They are concentrated in lower paid jobs, often on the bottom of their pay scale and already struggling with rent and the rocketing cost of gas and electricity.

Now we can anticipate a wave of austerity, as the Tories seek to make £54 billion worth of cuts in order to ensure we pay for the crisis in their system - a system which offers precious little to young workers, except uncertainty, poverty pay and increasingly pressurised working conditions.

Strike wave

No surprise then that the cost of living crisis has sparked the biggest strike wave

in Britain for decades. There have been major strikes on the railways, and of post and telecommunications workers across the country.

Unite, which is a huge union covering dozens of different sectors, have been involved in some 450 strikes over the last few months. Most importantly, they have won 80% of them. Bus drivers, refuse collectors, and even barristers have taken strike action.

Recently the Royal College of Nurses announced that they had won huge support for strike action in some 177 health trusts. This will be the first national strike the RCN has ever conducted.

At the time of writing UNISON, GMB and Unite members in the NHS are balloting for action.

Civil servants, university lecturers and support staff, and even the Royal College of Midwives are preparing to walk out. In total some 1.5 million workers are either balloting or preparing for strike action across the nation.

And this strike wave is only the beginning. At the recent TUC conference, several motions - including one put forward by UNISON - called for coordinated strike action.

At the recent People's Assembly demo, PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka said that his members would march out in support of any section of public sector workers who did the same.

The outlines of mass coordinated strike action can clearly be seen. On some pickets, there is even occasional talk of a general strike. While this is clearly early days, it is also very clear that we are living through times of class struggle the likes of which Britain has not seen for many, many generations.

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Bureaucracy

Conference needs to be a place where we can come together and hammer out how best we can organise to join this fight for something better. Young people have the most to gain from fighting for their wages, terms and conditions. In fact, as the crisis deepens, many young people are drawing the conclusion that we need to fight for a socialist society and to get rid of capitalism altogether.

For many years, the right wing leadership and the full time bureaucracy in the Trade Union and the Labour Party argued that workers aren't interested in strike action, or that the unions had no chance of winning and that we should wait for a Labour government to solve our problems.

With inflation galloping to over 15% per year according to RPI, however, the truth is that workers can't afford not to take action, a conclusion many of them are clearly reaching themselves!

You may have heard stories of nurses having to use food banks, which is appalling in itself. These people spend three years at university, amassing shocking amounts of debt - and for what?

No wonder there are almost 50,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS. But these stories are just the tip of the iceberg. The situation is becoming worse every day.

The current strike wave makes it clear that workers will fight, when they have to. They will go much further than the right-wing leaders in our movement expect. They will even push some of those leaders to move to the left... at least in words.

Unfortunately, however, words are not enough. And there are plenty of examples of the bureaucracy at the head of the unions talking left but ultimately selling the members short. A prime example of this was the huge public sector pensions

dispute of 2011, where UNISON in particular failed to capitalise on the mass opposition to cuts in pensions.

Instead, the leadership around Dave Prentis - who had promised to smash low pay when he was elected - allowed the employers to divide the movement and pick off one group of workers after another. A key chance to stop the coalition government in its tracks was squandered.

The question of leadership

For Marxists, the question of leadership is vital. We understand that workers need to have confidence in the union and in their own strength. The bosses and the Tories are always keen to try and divide us. No wonder that hundreds of trade union banners carry slogans like Unity is Strength.

Over the last two years there have been significant changes in UNISON. For the first time a left slate was elected to the NEC, on the back of the marvellous general secretary campaign waged by Paul Holmes and the Time for Real Change slate.

Very quickly, however, this new left leadership came up against the entrenched bureaucracy and the right-wing faction on the NEC. The establishment in the union fought might and main to isolate and defeat the lefts, just as they did with Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour Party.

Unfortunately, sections of the left succumbed to this pressure. They have still yet to learn the lessons of the Corbyn movement; you cannot win a political battle by organisational means and by compromises at the top.

The right-wing in UNISON are ruthless because they feel the weight of the capitalist establishment at their backs. The only thing that can oppose this is the weight of the working class - or in the case of UNISON, the massed ranks of the membership, if it were to be

organised and mobilised around socialist demands.

Join the struggle!

The answer to the cost-of-living crisis is not foot-dragging or free pens; nor is it compromise with the bosses and their hangers-on. The only way out for workers is class struggle.

While the bureaucracy fights tooth and nail to 'return to normal', the truth is that there is no 'normal' to return to. Capitalism is in the midst of a deep crisis. It has exhausted its potential as a system. And if it is not overthrown, then all our class can expect in its future is misery and horror.

Armed with a thoroughgoing socialist programme that calls for the nationalisation of the top monopolies, Britain's largest public sector union could spearhead a campaign of rolling strike action to topple the Tories and upend the capitalist system they represent. The bureaucracy will never carry out this struggle - so a leadership must be built who will.

Socialist Appeal exists precisely to give a voice to those workers and young people who want to put an end to this rotten system. We also exist to organise the most self-sacrificing and militant layers to build a fighting socialist alternative.

We recognise that the crisis in capitalism is demonstrating to more and more people that the system cannot deliver for us and our families. Layer after layer of the working class is beginning to ask itself the question: "is this really the best we can expect out of life?"

For millions of people, including those who work in the public sector, socialism is increasingly looking like the answer. We urge you to join the Marxists in the struggle to build the forces that can bring socialism about, and in the struggle to end this rotten decayed capitalist system forever. ■



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SUMMER STRIKE WAVE AND ANTI-TRADE UNION LAWS

John Russell

UNISON Norfolk County

(personal capacity)

This red hot summer has seen an outbreak of industrial action across a range of major trade unions. Already well over 150,000 workers from across the RMT, CWU, ASLEF, Unite and more have taken strike action, and there are yet more ballots underway across higher and further education unions and in the public sector.

Turnouts for the most recent ballots in RMT, CWU, NEU and other trade unions have been well over 70%, with the percentage of “yes” votes for industrial action between 80-90% each time.

The fact of the matter is that with inflation rates now well over 10%, pay rises of 1-4% that the bosses are proposing for many are dramatic pay cuts in real terms.

The “cost of living crisis,” as it has been dubbed, is affecting millions of people whose paychecks just don’t meet their living costs anymore. While the price of rent, fuel and food have been rising each year, pay rises just haven’t kept up.

Acceleration

Now the situation is accelerating faster than ever before. Everywhere you look, workers are taking action, including layers that haven’t gone on strike since the 80s.

In particular, these strikes are reportedly drawing in large numbers of new, younger workers who haven’t been active before.

Even the right-wing reactionary Sun newspaper was forced to acknowledge the heat of the situation: running a headline reading “Class War” in response to the RMT strikes.

Of course their intention was to fear-monger, but public support for the rail strikes remained extremely high in almost every poll undertaken at the time.

Tory tricks

Scrambling to put out the ever-growing inferno, in late July the Tory government passed some of the most reactionary anti-trade union legislation seen for some time.



It’s very clear that they are preparing themselves and their buddies in big business for the onslaught they’re about to face.

The new legislation makes it far easier for employers to bring in scab labour to break a picket line, by using agency workers to “plug staffing gaps caused by strike action”.

They also want to introduce minimum service requirements for certain public services, effectively ending the right to strike in those professions.

At the same time, we have seen Royal Mail bosses use legal threats against the Communication Workers Union (CWU), forcing it to call off six days of strike action by postal workers this month.

Whip of counterrevolution

Of course the courts and the laws - like all the apparatus of the state in capitalism - serve the interests of capital in the final analysis. What they deem to be “unlawful” will largely favour the bosses.

Marx once said that “the revolution needs from time to time the whip of the counter-revolution”. What he was explaining was that the impact of the bosses and the state in trying to quell the unrest, can often have the opposite effect.

By making “legal” action increasingly difficult to take, the capitalists may find

that workers decide that illegal action is by far a lesser risk than starving or going cold.

As one delegate, a Socialist Appeal supporter, put it at the recent TUC congress; “If the Tories try to force workers’ legitimate activities outside of the law, don’t expect us to be bound by them!”

Fan the flames!

The trade union movement was founded in defiance of repression from the bosses and official legality. At one point, even belonging to a union and striking was illegal.

Notably, this year is the 50th anniversary of the Pentonville Five, when five brave dockers refused to obey court injunction demanding that they stop picketing.

Following their imprisonment, workers across the country walked out in their thousands. Under pressure, the TUC threatened a general strike.

We are now entering a winter of discontent to follow the summer, with increasingly belligerent bosses willing to use any and all means to prevent workers from hurting their profits.

The trade unions must once again revive these great traditions, and prepare to break the anti-union laws that hold workers in chains, through militant methods and mass action. ■

FIGHTING RACISM IN THE WORKPLACE

THE NEED FOR CLASS STRUGGLE

Alex Gassem

Earlier this year, the TUC (Trades Union Congress) released a report on racism in the workplace, illustrating the extent of discrimination and bigotry that black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) workers face under capitalism today.

According to the study, 21% of BAME workers have been bullied or harassed at work. And more than 120,000 workers from such backgrounds have quit their jobs because of racism.

Workers from ethnic backgrounds, meanwhile, are “massively over-represented” in casualised jobs, with 13% of BAME workers reporting that their working hours had been changed at short notice.

This is on top of the disproportionate effect that the pandemic had on these layers of workers, with the report stating that: “BAME workers were more likely to do dangerous work, contract [COVID-19] and die from it.”

This also means that the cost-of-living crisis is hitting these workers especially hard – at a time when the whole working class is facing the prospect of a cold winter.

Sowing illusions

The TUC correctly points out that “racism...is used to divide working people”. Yet this directly contradicts the authors’ own suggestions for how to fix the problem: by appealing to the bosses and the capitalist state.

The TUC naively remarks that “[the] report ought to act as a wake-up call for employers, policymakers, and politicians”, before going on to say that “the government should...ensure that all workers benefit from the same employment rights”.

The labour movement should certainly demand proper redundancy pay, sick pay, and other workers’ rights, in order to win equal, decent wages and conditions for workers of all backgrounds.

But to politely ask the Tory government or the bosses to grant such concessions is to place false hope in the very class that actively uses racism and sexism to split the working class – along lines like ethnicity and gender – in order to divide, weaken, and further exploit all workers.

Jobs massacre

This was expressed openly and clearly in the disgusting chauvinism of the capitalist press during the ‘jobs

massacre’ at P&O Ferries earlier this year, when 800 workers were dismissed en masse.

These rags continually highlighted that the underpaid agency staff brought in to replace the sacked ‘British’ workers were generally from overseas.

By employing migrant labour, P&O bosses were able to use legal loopholes in maritime law to only pay these non-unionised workers wages equivalent to those in their native countries.

This is where racism comes from: a concerted effort by the capitalists to distract from the real division in society – the class divide between workers and bosses – by blaming one group of workers for the race to the bottom that all workers face.

In response, however, RMT general secretary Mick Lynch correctly stated that the answer to the bosses’ use of super-exploited migrant labour is for the unions to organise these workers as well.

Similarly, a number of the agency workers brought in by P&O bosses showed solidarity with their sacked peers, resigning in protest at the sackings, and refusing to replace those made unemployed.

The solution to the capitalists’ divide-and-rule tactics, in other words, is class unity.

Unconscious bias training

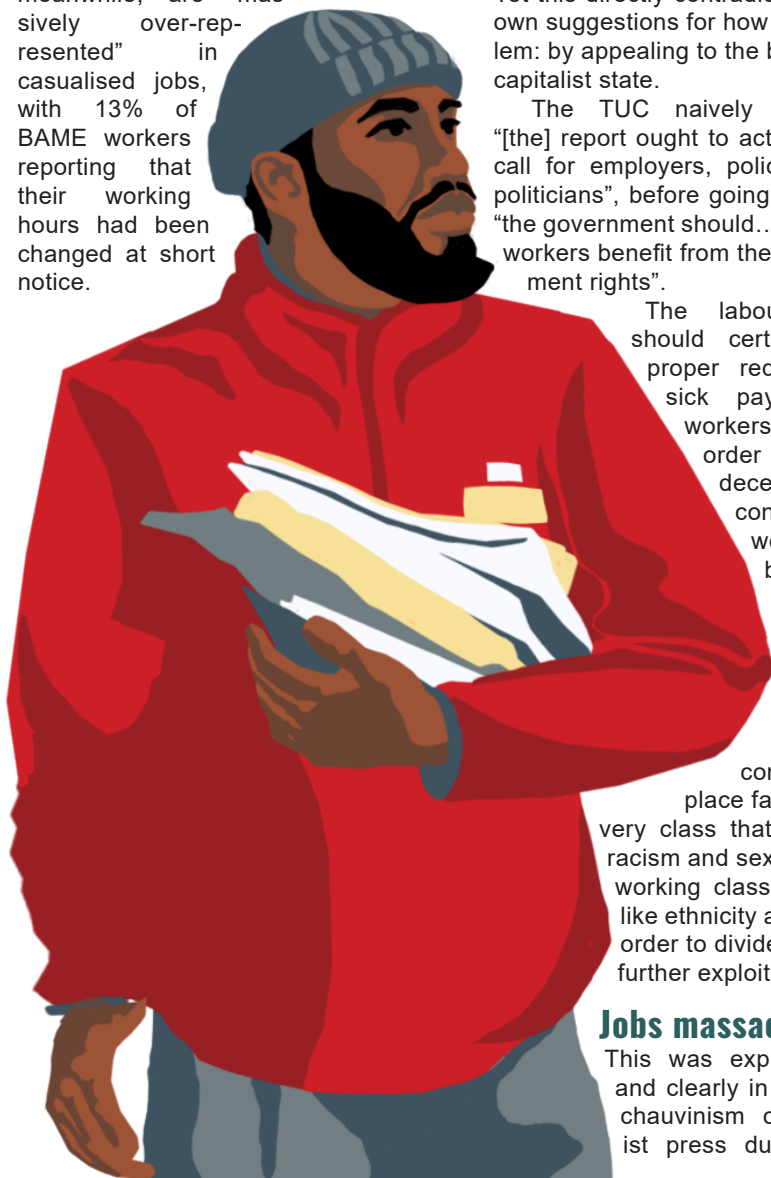
One of the methods often proposed to fight racism – particularly in workplaces – is that of ‘unconscious bias training’ (UBT).

UBT endeavours to curb discrimination and overcome ‘negative biases’ about race by simply explaining these implicit biases to people, so that they might consciously avoid them.

In spite of £5.8 billion being spent on diversity training just in the US, however, there is no evidence that UBT actually works.

Similarly, a 2020 statement by the UK Cabinet Office determined that: “There is currently no evidence that this training changes behaviour in the long term or improves workplace equality in

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terms of representation of women, ethnic minorities, or other minority groups.”

In one study, comparing the effects of eight UBT interventions amongst over 6,000 non-black Americans, the effects of all interventions disappeared within 1-5 days.

This shows the utter failure of utopian liberal reforms, which try to solve racism by slowly changing individuals’ ideas, whilst leaving the exploitative, oppressive capitalist system intact and untouched.

Class struggle

For socialists, the way to overcome any prejudices that do exist in society is through building strong workers’ organisations, and through united class struggle against the bosses, in order to bring out the real common interests that all workers share.

Without class struggle methods, the fight against racism is reduced to a question of mindset or culture. But the ‘culture’ of any workplace can only be truly transformed on the basis of changing the conditions and relations of work in general. And this means, above all, booting out the bosses who foment racism and benefit from it, and putting organised workers in control.

We cannot solve the problem of racist language or ‘jokes’ at work in isolation from the systemic discrimination and oppression in wider capitalist society.

In the final analysis, it is conditions that create consciousness. We cannot end bigotry and oppression without abolishing the system that breeds it.

‘Solutions’ like unconscious bias training will never work in a meaningful manner, since they do not address the fundamental question: Where do these ideas come from?

The blame lies firmly with the ruling class, who continually whip-up racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in order to divide workers and prevent them from organising along class lines. Disunity in the workplace creates much harder ground upon which to build for strike action, for example.

That is why it is imperative that the trade union movement reaches out to those who face racism at work, and brings them decisively into the struggle. Only in this way can genuine inroads be made into tackling any backward ideas that may exist within the workplace.

Lessons of Grunwick

46 years ago in Britain, for example, the struggle of the predominantly Asian workers at the Grunwick film processing



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firm was supported by workers of all backgrounds.

At Grunwick, pay was low; hours were long; and overtime could be enforced at any time on the un-unionised workforce.

During the summer of 1976, conditions worsened due to a heatwave. One worker, Devshi Bhudia, was sacked for “working too slow”. Three other workers walked out in solidarity, with another being fired for no reason. These workers picketed and joined the APEX union (now part of GMB).

Their strike grew in numbers, as did support from the wider labour movement, through their class organisations. For example, members of the postal workers’ union would refuse to deliver mail to the Grunwick site, in order to avoid crossing the picket line.

This unity of workers terrified the bosses, resulting in collusion between the police and management at the firm, with hundreds arrested.

The workers bravely continued their struggle, in spite of the cowardly union bureaucrats abandoning them, until the dispute was defeated in July 1978.

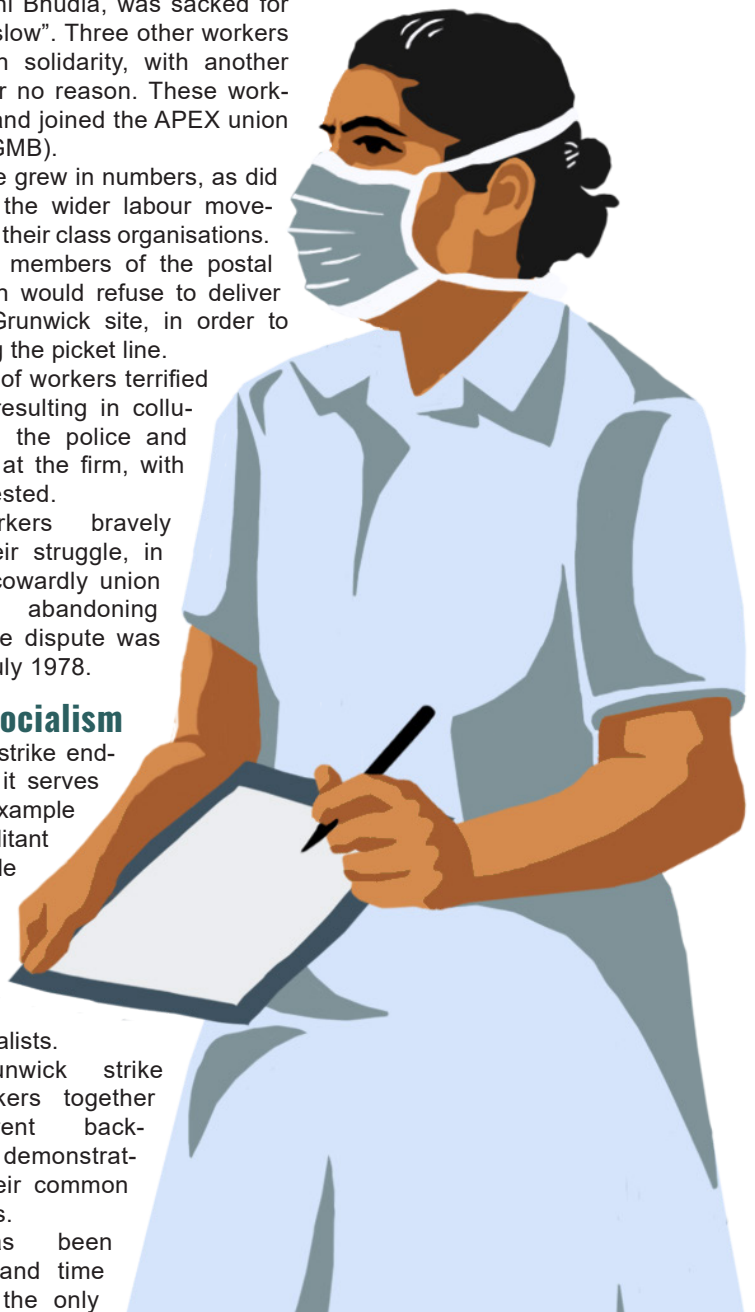
Fight for socialism

Although the strike ended in defeat, it serves as a clear example of how militant class struggle can quickly overcome decades of divide-and-rule tactics from the capitalists.

The Grunwick strike brought workers together from different backgrounds, and demonstrated clearly their common class interests.

This has been shown time and time again to be the only

way to overcome racism, sexism, and all other forms of bigotry: not through appealing to the bosses, or by relying on diversity quotas and other liberal reforms, but through the experience of struggling together as a class in the fight for a socialist future. ■



SRI LANKAN UPRISING WHERE NEXT FOR THE ARAGALAYA?



Ben Curry

International Marxist Tendency

[Article originally written in July, amended to reflect current events]

On Saturday 9 July, tens of thousands of ordinary Sri Lankans overcame transport chaos to descend on the capital, Colombo. Police barricades were swept aside like matchsticks, and the masses stood before the steps of the president's official residence.

Then, suddenly, they surged forward. The masses, in the floodtide of their 'aragalaya' (struggle) suddenly overflowed the safe channels that the ruling class had erected to keep them out of politics. Within minutes, thousands of people had taken over the presidential residence. Within hours, the president-in-hiding was forced to name the date of his resignation.

This is a tremendous victory that has shown the masses their immense power - not just in Sri Lanka, but over the whole globe. The question will quickly be posed, however: with Gota gone, where next for the aragalaya?

Months of struggle

Over recent months, Sri Lanka has seen a frightful economic collapse. The combination of the crisis of capitalism that erupted with the pandemic, and the mismanagement of the arrogant Rajapaksa clique has plunged the nation into chaos.

The country's foreign currency reserves have all but evaporated. Without hard cash to import basic goods, Sri Lanka has run out of fuel to run generators, in addition to cooking oil, baby milk, and

even basic medicines and paper. In the hot summer weather, long blackouts became the norm. Inflation is officially over 50 percent, but for the most basic goods it is far, far higher.

The unbearable suffering of the masses was what led to the spontaneous eruption of anger in late March demanding the removal of Gota and the entire Rajapaksa dynasty. In April, the struggle escalated to the permanent occupation of Galle Face Green, opposite the president's office and official residence.

In mid-May, the government announced that it would default on its debt. Despite one price hike after another, in June, the government announced that the country was essentially out of fuel. Fuel sales for all but emergency vehicles were banned. To eat, people must work. But how can people work without being able to drive to their jobs?

Dramatic events

In every revolution, there arrives a point when the masses lose their fear. On 9 July, a boiling point was reached with the monster march in Colombo.

Tens of thousands of people ignored Gota's latest curfew to descend on the capital. Having braved humiliation, and the bullets, batons and tear gas of the regime, they now stood at the threshold of the building that they were forbidden from entering. In a mighty surge, they stormed the presidential residence.

After a period of jubilation and chanting, the masses looked around and found themselves in the lap of luxury. One apparently on-duty police officer sat at the president's piano to play a tune. In the open courtyard, dozens of protesters cooled off in the president's private swimming pool.

'National unity'

This is clearly a massive victory for the masses in struggle. But Gota's resignation, completed on the 14th of July, only poses new questions for the aragalaya.

The crisis that Sri Lanka is traversing is at bottom a capitalist crisis. And far from easing off, it is only becoming deeper. Two years after the most severe crisis in capitalism's history, the world is once more heading towards a deep recession.

The Sri Lankan masses have set an example in terms of how to struggle. But whilst Gota is gone, the Sri Lankan ruling class remains in the saddle, and new President Ranil Wickremesinghe will continue to rule in their interests.

Already he has launched a severe campaign of repression targeting the leaders of the movement and above all the left, using the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (the PTA).

Feeling the revolutionary tide ebb, he intends to take advantage and go on the offensive.

The masses will be forced to take their aragalaya onto the streets once more in response. In the course of their struggle, broader and broader layers will begin to draw the conclusion that their suffering can only be ended by overthrowing capitalism itself.

But to achieve this, the mass of workers in Sri Lanka need their own political voice, their own party. The wealth of the rich must be taken over for the benefit of the working people. The masses who took over the luxurious palace of the president have seen that the wealth is there.

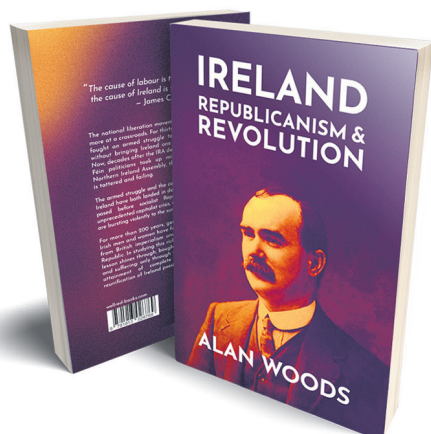
The problem is that it is in the wrong hands. ■

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UNISON MARXISTS' CHARTER

Bold measures are required to deal with the cost-of-living crisis. Only a clear socialist programme can offer a way forward. We must have no faith in the Tories or their hangers-on, whose worship of the market has brought this country to its knees.

Neither can we have faith in Keir Starmer and the right-wing Labour leadership, who are taking the party back to Blairism and posing as a "safe pair of hands" for big business.

The capitalist system is in a complete impasse. It cannot be reformed. It must be overthrown.

The bosses and their craven political representatives have shown what their priorities are. They intend to fight for their class interests, tooth and nail. We must establish and fight for our own.

■ **For a fully-funded, publicly-owned, and free health service, under workers' control and management.**

■ **Reverse all privatisation and outsourcing. All private health and care services must be nationalised without compensation, and integrated into the NHS. Nationalise the pharmaceutical companies - without compensation - in order to ensure that medicines and vaccines are produced rapidly, efficiently, and made freely available to all.**

■ **Reverse the cuts to local government! Give local authorities the power**

to cap rents at affordable levels. Ban evictions and cancel housing debt. For a mass programme to build a million council houses a year, paid for by nationalising the construction companies.

■ **A proper living wage must be provided to all workers of at least £15 an hour, linked to automatically rise with inflation so as to stop the erosion of pay. End all forms of discrimination; equal pay for equal work. This includes age discrimination, where young workers are forced to work for a fraction of the real minimum wage.**

■ **Repeal the anti-trade union laws. No to class compromise. All elected officials in the labour movement should be subject to the immediate right of recall by the members, and take the wage of an average member of their labour organisation.**

■ **If the bosses say they cannot afford to pay for workers' wages, we say: open up the books! Let the working class and the labour movement see the accounts. If firms plead bankruptcy, they should not be bailed out but nationalised under workers' control.**

■ **No to austerity! Reverse the cuts! The working class must not be made to pay for this crisis!**

■ **Ban evictions and cancel housing debts. Give local authorities the power to cap rents at affordable**

levels. Bring empty properties and the assets of the big landlords and management companies under public control.

■ **The financial resources required to fight the crisis must not come from increased taxes or more austerity cuts. Nationalise the banks under public ownership and control. Rather than a "wealth tax" we call for the total expropriation of these financial monopolies.**

■ **Nationalise the 100 biggest monopolies under workers' control and management, and without compensation to the capitalists. They have made plenty of cash at our expense already! On this basis the economy can be democratically planned in the interests of the majority, and not for the super-profits of a tiny few.**

This crisis does not just exist in Britain alone, but is felt internationally. A Socialist Federation of Britain should be linked to a World Socialist Federation, in order to plan resources internationally for the benefit of all. This would put an end to the brutality of capitalism and allow humanity to begin solving the urgent issues of climate change, disease, and poverty that face our planet.

If you agree with our programme here, get involved with Socialist Appeal in Unison and help us fight for a better, socialist world! ■

WHY YOU SHOULD JOIN US

Marxists are class conscious fighters for socialism. As Marx explained, we should be regarded as the most resolute section of the working class.

Marxism arms us with a conscious understanding of society and the class struggle. Only by absorbing this outlook can we lay the foundation for the overthrow of capitalism.

For us, Marxism is the science of social revolution and therefore needs to be studied.

Our tendency therefore stresses the need to educate and train our members in Marxist theory and the struggles of the working class. This gives us considerable advantages. First and foremost, Marxist theory is a guide to action, a guide to the class struggle.

As isolated individuals we can do very little. However, organised together

we can achieve a considerable amount. Organisation allows us to concentrate our forces to much greater effect. Based on correct policies and perspectives, we can intervene effectively in the class struggle.

The present reformist leadership of the labour movement has led to one retreat after another. In practice they accept capitalism and its limits.

The leadership of the Labour Party is now in the grip of the right wing, who serve the interests of capitalism. This revival is due to the weakness of the left to act decisively, which in turn is a reflection of the weakness of reformism.

Likewise, the reformist trade union leadership has failed to meet the challenges we face. They are lagging completely behind the objective situation. For them, it is simply 'business as usual.'

But the crisis of capitalism is posing massive challenges in front of the working

class. We will fight shoulder to shoulder with those prepared to fight. In doing so, we will point to the future needs of the movement.

Our task is to provide the necessary clarity for the struggle. Capitalism cannot be reformed; it needs to be consciously overthrown by the working class in Britain and internationally. That is why we are internationalists and proud to be part of the International Marxist Tendency ■

