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UNITE ELECTIONS INDUSTRIAL MILITANCY OR CLASS COLLABORATION?

Unite Socialist Appeal supporters

With elections underway for Unite's new executive council, a clear divide is emerging within the union. On one side is an old left calling for compromise with the bosses and Tories. On the other are grassroots activists demanding militant action.

The coming months will see elections for the executive council of one of Britain's largest unions, Unite.

With Britain entering a period of intensified class struggle, the question of who sits on Unite's leading body is no small matter.

Branch nominations for candidates are already underway. The outcome of this election – to be announced in May – will significantly shape the path of the whole trade union movement.

Workers' candidate

Unite has undergone important changes over the last couple of years, under Sharon Graham's leadership. In fact, her very election was an indication that a shift in mood was already taking place within the rank-and-file membership.

Ordinary members of the union had backed someone who was initially considered an underdog candidate.

Graham gained this support on the basis of her promise to fight for "jobs, pay, and conditions".

Internally, she also committed to "streamlining the bureaucracy", while giving more power to shop stewards and reps. Her pitch as the workers' candidate gained a big echo.

With the political front blocked due to Labour's takeover by Starmer and the right wing, it was clear that workers were – and still are – looking to their unions in order to fight back

'United Left'

Since then, under great pressure from below, the union has been involved in a tremendous level of industrial activity. Hundreds of disputes have been fought and won with Graham's backing. Such victories have also been achieved by workers deploying militant methods, including secondary picketing.

The executive committee (EC) of the union,

however, remains in the hands of the old 'United Left' bureaucracy – those who led the union under former general secretary Len McCluskey.

In the past, this United Left leadership was prominent in the battle against the right wing of the labour movement, both in Unite and in the Labour Party.

Nevertheless, their bureaucratic outlook led to them making grave errors along the way: opposing mandatory reselection of Labour MPs, and blocking the party's reintroduction of Clause IV.

Consequently, the United Left (UL) has long become ossified. And now these same leaders are playing a negative role.

Negotiation vs action

There were clear signs of this during the Unite general secretary elections, with UL candidate Steve Turner speaking proudly in the language of class compromise: calling for negotiations with the Tories and the bosses, and promising to work alongside establishment champion Keir Starmer.

Graham, by contrast, with rank-and-file members behind her, has consistently spoken in the language of class war – against the Tory government and the employers. Faced with Tories' latest anti-union

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threats, for example, the Unite general secretary has threatened illegal strike action.

She has also launched investigations into potential collusion by Unite officials in the blacklisting scandal, and into the construction of a hotel and conference centre that took place during McCluskey's reign, which may have involved fraudulent activity.

These EC elections are now seeing this split within the union coming out into the open and crystallising.

On the one side is a bureaucratic layer that bases itself on the politics of class collaborationism. On the other are those backing Graham's calls for industrial militancy and action against the bosses, the Tories, and Starmer's Labour.

For a militant union!

A slate of EC candidates is standing in these elections, composed of grassroots activists who back the changes that Graham wants to make. This includes Arsalan Ghani, a *Socialist Appeal* supporter and longstanding trade unionist, who is running for the education sector seat.

We support the aims of democratising the union and turning it into a truly fighting weapon for workers. Indeed, we think that the best guard against any corruption and

class collaboration is to extend democracy into every aspect of the union – not just to 'streamline' bureaucracy, but to do away with it altogether.

This means ensuring that all full-time official positions in the union are elected, for a set period of time, and subject to recall. Furthermore, these officials should take the same average wage as the members they represent.

Above all, we need to bring these campaigns into the rank and file, and establish an open Broad Left that involves members in the union's discussions, debates, and decisions.

In reality, we can already see a new Broad Left in formation – catalysed by Graham's general Secretary campaign, and steered by the struggles that branches and rank-and-file members have been fighting.

This should now be formalised, so that grassroots activists can help to transform our union into a militant, democratic one. That is exactly what Unite must become, if it is to really fight for our class in the stormy period ahead. ■



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AMBULANCE WORKERS STRIKE FIGHT FOR THE NHS!

Will Gedling

Unite North West Services

(personal capacity)

Striking ambulance workers are taking a stand against attacks on their pay and conditions. We spoke to workers at the picket lines, who were ready to fight tooth and nail for victory and the future of the NHS.

On 21 of December, in the cold and busy period leading up to Christmas, 1,600 Unite ambulance workers went out on strike.

Demanding an above-inflation pay rise, ambulance staff organised with Unite came out alongside colleagues in Unison and GMB and formed picket lines at ambulance service trusts across Britain.

With 92% of Unite's ambulance workers voting for the strike, workers throughout the NHS are clearly taking a stand against the assault on pay and conditions by governments past and present.

NHS fightback

Pay is a key question when it comes to the future of the NHS. One Unite member in the West Midlands highlighted the NHS is in crisis partly because the pay is so low, meaning recruitment and retention is falling.

Unite's general secretary, Sharon Graham, correctly highlighted this as well when commenting on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's New Year's speech: "He knows that the suppression of pay has led to the unsafe and unsustainable staffing levels at the heart of the NHS crisis."

Indeed, the situation is so dire that in some ambulance stations they have resorted to opening food banks for the staff.

Graham has elsewhere described these strikes as "the fight of our lives for the very NHS itself" as workers attempt to save the future of the health service from the Tory government. Workers on the picket line clearly understand that this is what is at stake.



One ambulance worker a Socialist Appeal activist spoke to at a picket line in East Lancashire, an ex-policeman, told us he never thought he would be on strike. Now, however, he said he would "fight tooth and nail" for its victory. This militant sentiment was shared by all those on the picket.

Strike-busting

Before taking action, the unions carefully considered how their workers would handle essential emergency cases for patients during this strike.

Nevertheless, the right-wing press whipped up a ferocious campaign of fear-mongering against the strike.

The decision taken by workers was to still respond to emergencies deemed life-threatening. Nevertheless, the Tory government stepped in and deployed 600 members of the armed forces to strike-break.

However this strike busting backfired, with the roped-in soldiers unfamiliar with the nature of this work.

One striker explained how they were severely limited by their lack of experience – as was found when one soldier drove their ambulance down a too-narrow road, crashing into the side of a wall!

Unite the struggles

With all three unions coming out together, this action was a great first step. Unite is also planning to extend the strike ballot to its members in the wider NHS to hopefully bring even more workers out.

But with no indication the government is willing to budge on questions of pay or staffing, the workers we spoke to argued the next stage requires continued coordination nationally, with all unions, and for further escalation.

And as this struggle deepens, it will necessitate cross-union organisation at the rank-and-file level, with joint strike committees being established in every NHS workplace.

With nurses in the RCN set to come out again and junior doctors in the BMA also balloting, workers at every level and in every part of the NHS are gearing up for battle.

This extends to the wider public sector also, with teachers and civil servants already striking.

Unite, along with its sister unions, should therefore be preparing to organise a public-sector wide strike to topple the Tory government hellbent on destroying these services. Alongside this must be the demand for fully-funded, nationalised public services run by

UNITE ELECTIONS FOR A MILITANT DEMOCRATIC UNION!

Arsalan Ghani

Unite the Union (Education sector)

Workers in Britain are facing the worst fall in living standards since records began. RPI inflation officially stands at 14%. But price rises for essential food items are reaching 30-40%.

This follows a decade of real wage cuts by employers in both the private and public sectors. In many sectors, real-terms pay has declined by around 20-30% over the last 10 years.

More than ever, the bosses and the Tory government are on the offensive. In response, Unite, along with our sister unions, is waging a fightback.

With the capitalist class digging their heels in, this will be a long and bitter struggle. As a result, our union must be fighting fit for the period ahead.

Since being elected as general secretary, Sharon Graham has taken important steps forward in this respect. But we can and must go further.

The upcoming executive council (EC) elections provide the opportunity to deepen these changes, which have empowered rank-and-file members to fight

a record number of disputes with wholehearted support from the union – winning important victories along the way.

This is why I am standing for the Unite EC, in the Education sector

seat, campaigning on Sharon Graham's platform of building industrial strength across the union.

I will work to help our general secretary carry out the programme she was elected on – fighting to transform Unite into a militant, democratic union.

Marketisation of education

Historically, the education sector has had a reputation of being well-paid, with good working conditions. But today, the situation has never been so dire.

Falling pay is coupled with Tory cuts to universities, further education, and technical institutions. As a result, the sector is increasingly being carved up by the capitalists, accelerating the decline in terms of conditions and wages.

A programme of marketisation is being carried out systematically across higher education. This means the imposition of larger fees and rents for students. And it means a rampant rise in privatisation and outsourcing.

Services such as cleaning, catering, maintenance, estates, security, technicians, IT, training, and even teaching and supervision are all now being outsourced at many institutions.

Private contractors are making huge profits, feasting like vultures. They do so by degrading services and attacking staff conditions: bringing in casualised contracts, reducing staff levels, and deskilling. Additionally, outsourced companies often have no collective bargaining arrangements.

Workers in many universities have held protests and even strikes against outsourcing recently, including at Leeds, Cambridge, UCL, Greenwich, and Sussex.

Unite the Union can and must turn this situation around by fighting back against the employers who are driving down pay and conditions. And

given that we represent members all across the education sector, our union has the potential to play a leading role in this struggle.

Kick out the profiteers

Despite the crisis, universities are still building fancy new buildings and making other superficial investments, in an effort to entice big business sponsors and wealthy donors – and also to attract foreign students, who have to pay even higher fees than home students.

At the same time, in secondary and further education, academisation has seen many schools and colleges transformed into private enterprises.

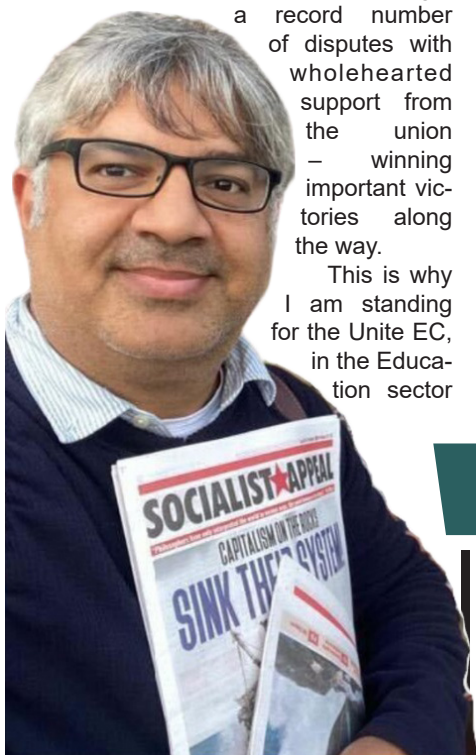
Across the sector, a whole swathe of corporate management professionals are hired on six-figure salaries, with the goal of 'bringing in money' and 'managing investments'. But the money these bosses 'earn' is the result of exploiting staff and undermining services.

This is the logic of capitalism: not investment to better these institutions of learning and research, in the interests of society; but instead investment to expand the profits of the bosses and shareholders.

And whenever a crisis hits, as it is now, it is staff who bear the brunt. Massive redundancies are currently being carried out across the sector, alongside the imposition of 'fire and rehire'. Departments and centres that cannot 'generate revenue' and implement 'savings' are being closed.

Pension systems are collapsing, with universities abandoning their obligation to support staff in retirement. It's no surprise that pension reform is one of the key demands for striking higher education staff.

As a committed socialist, if elected, I would raise the need not only to fight back against these attacks, but to fight for a fully publicly-owned education system, under the democratic control of staff and students.



As a committed socialist, if elected, I would raise the need not only to fight back against these attacks, but to fight for a fully publicly-owned education system, under the democratic control of staff and students.

Only on this basis can we remove the pernicious influence of profit in the sector, as well as that of bureaucratic management.

Class fighters

Under Sharon's leadership, Unite has won over 80% of the industrial disputes we have been involved in, securing over £250 million in additional pay and benefits for workers.

We need to ensure that we build on our wins and grow our union by electing an EC that shares Sharon's vision for Unite.

This means prioritising and empowering rank-and-file members and reps in order to keep winning. We must completely break with the old methods and structures of top-down committees, which take little action while leaving members in the dark.

Already, we have taken steps forward: introducing combines, for example, to bring together reps across sectors and industries.

But I think we can go further. We should look to further democratise the union – ensuring accountability, and placing as much power in members' hands as possible.

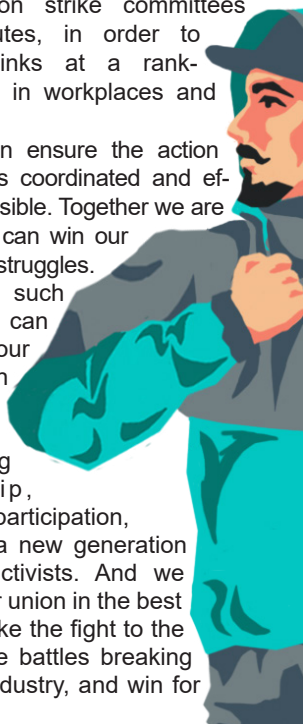
In my opinion, this should mean ensuring that full-time officials in the union are democratically-elected for a set period of time; subject to recall; and on the same average wage as the members they represent.

This will help to bring through the best class fighters from the rank and file of the union, and strengthen members' trust in the union structures and officials. And it will prevent the danger of union collusion with the bosses, as we saw with the black-listing scandal in construction.

With so many sister unions taking action, we should also support the formation of cross-union strike committees during disputes, in order to strengthen links at a rank-and-file level in workplaces and industries.

These can ensure the action we take is as coordinated and effective as possible. Together we are stronger and can win our disputes and struggles.

Through such changes, we can provide our members with confidence in their union – boosting membership, increasing participation, and forging a new generation of militant activists. And we can place our union in the best position to take the fight to the bosses in the battles breaking out across industry, and win for our class. ■



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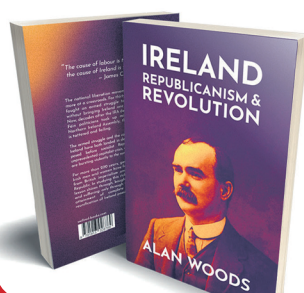
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THE 1926 GENERAL STRIKE



NINE DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

Socialist Appeal

With the resurgence of the industrial struggle in Britain, the question of a general strike is once again being discussed within the labour movement. This article, originally published in Socialist Appeal in May 2019, looks at the last (and only) time Britain experienced a general strike in 1926, and the lessons for activists today.

Beginning on 3 May 1926, a General Strike swept Britain. Lasting for nine days, the strike showed the enormous power and solidarity of the working class.

The situation that gave rise to the strike had been prepared for years in advance. British capitalism had emerged from the First World War considerably weakened. Rather than investing in advanced machinery to compete with the USA and Germany, the British ruling class responded by attacking wages and conditions.

Miners in particular were expected to accept a 13% reduction in their wages, whilst working an extra hour each day. Feeling the pressure from below, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) responded by threatening the government with a general strike.

Government mobilises...

The government retreated temporarily, in order to prepare for an all-out struggle. This involved preparing a scab army by the name of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), composed of fascists and other right-wing scum. After nine months of preparations, the government went on the offensive.

With the labour movement swinging to the left after the coming to power of the Tories in 1924, the General Council of the TUC was under enormous pressure to act. Workers in all industries correctly saw the miners struggle as their struggle. If the miners were defeated, others would be soon to follow.

On 1 May 1926, the decision to strike was carried by 3,653,527 votes to 49,911

votes at the TUC. Then on 3 May, millions of workers responded to the call to strike, in some cases against the advice of their own trade union leaders.

The TUC leaders, believing that they would reach a settlement with the government, had made no preparations for the strike. To their surprise, and to the shock of the ruling class, workers showed their magnificent capacity to improvise and organise from below.

...Workers respond

Trades Councils in every area formed Councils of Action and strike committees. Nothing could happen without the permission of the working class.

As the strike developed more and more into a struggle against the state, the Councils of Action developed increasingly into organs of self-government. In reality they were the embryos of workers' power.

Militant demonstrations took place in all the main towns and cities. Clashes with the police were commonplace, and thousands of workers were arrested and imprisoned.

Despite attempts to intimidate workers, the strike was unstoppable. More and more workers came out each day, including even unorganised workers.

Millions of workers put short shrift to the resistance of the ruling class. The General Council of the TUC were terrified of the revolutionary implications of the strike, such as the workers' strength.



Betrayal

A general strike inevitably poses the question of power. Either it will lead to the conquest of power by the working class, or a severe defeat for the workers.

Since even the "Lefts" on the General Council lacked any perspective of taking power and overthrowing capitalism, they rejected the political nature of the strike. They did everything they could to "compromise" with the government, i.e. restore order for the capitalists.

Behind the scenes, the General Council completely capitulated to the government, accepting a reduction in the miners' wages, with no guarantees against victimisation.

This news came as a complete shock to the workers, who could feel the enormous power they wielded during the strike. In response to the sell-out, the railwaymen, dockers, engineers, and other sections renewed the strike, in order to prevent it from ending as a complete rout.

Faced with this growing anger, the government announced that the employers must take back the workers without victimisation.

Role of leadership

With the back of the strike broken by its own leadership, workers returned to work in one section after another. The miners held out for another few months but eventually were starved back to work.

Ultimately, the potential existed for the working class to begin the socialist transformation of society. This potential was squandered by the tops of the trade union and labour movement, who consciously led the strike to defeat.

The lessons from this episode are clear: the working class when organised is the most powerful force in society and can bring it to a standstill. But without a revolutionary leadership, it will not achieve victory. Now more than ever, our task is to prepare in advance and build such a revolutionary leadership. That is what Socialist Appeal is seeking to build today. ■

WORKERS STAND FIRM AGAINST DANGER AND DIRTY TRICKS



FAWLEY REFINERY STRIKE

Gavin Ribeiro

Unite the Union member

(personal capacity)

Hundreds of workers employed at the Fawley oil refinery, the largest petro-chemical complex of its kind in the UK, have embarked on a series of strikes in their fight for better pay. The Fawley refinery is owned by US oil giant ExxonMobil - a company which made record profits of \$20 billion in the third quarter of 2022.

The workers at the site, organised in the Unite and GMB unions, are employed through various subcontractors, such as Altrad or Bilfinger. Consequently, union membership is spread across several companies.

These workers are employed under the NAECI (National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry), under which workers at similar sites receive the same pay and conditions.

Unite and GMB are jointly negotiating for an increase in the 'bonus incentive' payment, which has a maximum of £2.37 per hour under the NAECI agreement. Fawley workers are currently getting just 74p, however, and the unions are demanding a pay rise to meet the maximum bonus incentive payment.

Dangerous conditions

Fawley refinery is run as a 24-hour operation. Workers at the refinery have said that only a "skeleton crew" is present during night shifts and on weekends.

Such corner-cutting by the bosses has almost had tragic consequences. GMB has alleged that severely-rusted steel supports gave way in November, leading to the collapse of an important petrol-production structure in the refinery.

This collapse led to a leak of a huge amount of highly flammable gases, released from a pipe that was damaged by the incident.

Workers have said that if the wind was blowing in the other direction, the gas would have hit the nearby heat exchanger. Had this happened, according to one worker, *"the whole place would have blown up"*.

In other words, an unimaginable disaster was only averted thanks to chance.

Smear tactics

It is no surprise that the refinery workers, employed on pathetic pay under dangerous conditions, have been pushed beyond their limits.

As a result, the workers took two six-day blocks of strike action: from 21-26 November; and from 28 November to 3 December. Starting from 21 November, the workers formed a hard picket line, preventing any traffic from entering the refinery.

In a clear attempt to smear the strikers, the employers sent a letter to union shop stewards and to the Hampshire Police, scandalously accusing workers of "wolf whistling and sexually harrassing underage schoolchildren trying to reach their place of education".

This is a disgusting lie, which shows how low the bosses are prepared to stoop in order to defeat this strike. Picketers have shown exemplary conduct towards the public. And the displays of solidarity from locals and passersby clearly show that these divisive tactics are not working.

In the early hours of 24 November, the police arrived in force to disrupt the peaceful picketing activities of the Fawley refinery workers. Workers were shoved by the police, and their ability to picket was severely disrupted.

The workers at Fawley refinery have alleged known trade unionists at the site are being victimised on spurious grounds. Some of the employers even discontinued payment for the accommodation of workers taking part in strike action who have travelled to work at the site.

And according to one worker, speaking to *Socialist Appeal* on 9 December,

management threatened to sack asbestos workers who didn't go back to work by the following Monday.

On the same day, the police brazenly arrested one of the Unite stewards on the picket line at Gate 1 of the Fawley refinery. The workers refused to leave the picket line until their comrade was let go; the police then released the arrested Unite steward because of this show of solidarity.

Despite the blows struck against them by the boys-in-blue, however, the Fawley workers are prepared to continue strike action if necessary.

They also adopted the name 'The Fawley Fighters' - a fitting name for these workers who have set a militant example for the whole labour movement. They even utilised the hard picket line in defiance of the anti-union laws.

Indeed, this is exactly how the labour movement must fight back against the anti-union legislation the Tories are planning to unleash on the unions.

Spread the strike

The Fawley Fighters are now organising to bring in other workers - employed by subcontractors across the site - into the ranks of the unions. There is also talk of spreading the strike to other NAECI sites.

The Fawley refinery strike is likely to be a long and bitter dispute. Nevertheless, recent victories by dockers, bus drivers, hospital staff, and many more show that the workers can win. The lesson is clear: militancy pays.

This struggle has also demonstrated the need for workers themselves to run these vital industries, as part of a socialist plan of production. In the hands of the capitalists, disaster lurks around every corner - as the structural collapse at Fawley shows.

It is time to put an end to the bosses' profiteering, which is putting workers in harm's way. The Fawley Fighters have showing the whole labour movement how it can be done. They deserve the utmost support in their fight. ■

SOCIALIST APPEAL: OUR PROGRAMME

The Tories are the political representatives of big business. As defenders of capitalism, they are the sworn enemies of the working class.

Neither do we have trust in Keir Starmer and the right-wing Labour leadership, who are taking the party back to Blairism.

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

We are fighting for bold socialist policies to defend workers and challenge the capitalist system.

- Answer the cost-of-living crisis with a £15 per hour minimum wage. For a sliding (rising) scale of wages, with increases in pay, pensions, and benefits automatically linked to prices.
- If the bosses say they can't afford this, 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.
- For a fully 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.
- Fight the climate catastrophe and inflation with expropriation and socialist planning. Nationalise the energy monopolies, big supermarket chains, and distributors, without compensation.

■ Ban evictions and cancel housing debts. Give local authorities the power to cap rents at affordable levels. And bring empty properties and the assets of the big landlords and management companies under public control.

■ For a mass programme to build a million council houses a year. Nationalise the land, construction companies, and banks to provide the resources to accomplish this.

■ To fight job cuts and unemployment, work should be shared out without any loss of pay, in order to lower the hours of the working week.

■ Repeal the anti-trade union laws. No to class compromise. All union officials to be regularly elected, with the right of immediate recall by the membership. Officials to receive no more than the average wage of a skilled worker.

■ Fight for the real emancipation of women. Remove all barriers to women working: provide free nurseries, after-school childcare, and care for the elderly. End all forms of discrimination. Equal pay for work of equal value.

■ Abolish the relics of privilege and feudalism: the monarchy and the House of Lords. The assets of the parasitic landlord class and aristocracy should be expropriated for the public good.

■ Scrap tuition fees and student rents. Free education and full maintenance grants for all. End marketisation – kick the profiteers out of education. Put staff in control in schools and universities.

■ Many small businesses are faced with bankruptcy – squeezed not only by the banks, but by the big monopolies. By nationalising the banks we can supply these small businesses with the lifeline of guaranteed low-interest credit.

■ The financial resources required to fight the crisis must not come from increased taxes or more austerity, but through the nationalisation of the banks and finance houses. Rather than a 'wealth tax', we call for the expropriation of the monopolies.

■ Instead of building up the national debt through government borrowing, the money needed should be obtained entirely from expropriating the accumulated profits of big business and the billionaires.

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

■ For a mass campaign to bring down this criminal Tory government and do away with this rotten system!

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 Unite 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 ■

