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Unions needed more than ever in 2008

As we go to press, Christmas is almost upon us, so (if you get this before Christmas!) we send warm seasonal greetings to all our readers. For many people it will be a more difficult year than for some time, as food prices are rising, the prospects for the economy are worrying, and having "Christmas on credit" doesn't seem such a good idea, especially as credit itself is no longer as easy to get, for some, at least.

The coming year will demonstrate the inherent instability of the capitalist system, and this will hurt us all. With inequality of pay between the have-nots and the have-yachts reaching obscene levels, whilst many workers – even the police – are being offered below-inflation pay awards, we hope to see a year of rising militancy and pay campaigns from the trade union movement. People are going to need trade unions more than ever, and we in the Yeovil & District TUC will be in the thick of it, working to strengthen the trade union movement and to build that most vital ingredient – SOLIDARITY.

In 2008, unions will be campaigning for equal pay, for defence of jobs, against cuts in real pay, for more council housing and social housing, and for real measures to combat climate change. We shall fight against the "hollowing out" of the NHS by contracting-out of services to private contractors, and against the Private Finance Initiative, which is imposing terrible financial burdens on the taxpayer. We want to repeal Thatcher's anti-union laws and we want equal rights for temporary and agency workers and better pensions for all.

Lots to do. Let's get stuck in!

Solidarity with Cadbury's workers

Unions are resisting plans to close the Cadbury's chocolate factory at Somerdale, Keynsham. With a 200-year history of chocolate manufacture in the town, the closure will devastate the area, resulting in 700 direct and up to 1,000 further indirect job losses, the Unite union has warned. Workers from Cadbury's sites at Bourneville, Marlbrook and Chirk have also been campaigning hard against the company's plan to move production to Poland. Campaigners have even produced their own advent calendar.

Brian Revell, Unite national organiser for food and agriculture, points out that 98 per cent of chocolate made at Somerdale is consumed in Britain and moving production to Poland will add millions of food miles to its products, increasing its carbon footprint.

Dariusz Skoriek, head of Polish union Solidarity's national food section, and Marek Wytrykowski, who are both from the Wedel factory in Warsaw, pledged their support when they met their UK counterparts at the Cadbury's European Works Council.

"We can be relied upon to work closely with Keynsham and all other UK sites, they said. "We support the campaign against Cadbury taking part in a race to the bottom for cheap labour. We are not happy to take work from the UK and we send our best wishes."

The campaign is supported by socialist film-maker Ken Loach and England rugby star Gareth Chilcott.

Sign the online petition which has attracted worldwide support:

www.petition.co.uk/cadburys.

Taunton Trades Union Council is planning to hold a May Day celebration in Taunton on Saturday 3rd May. The theme will be "Peace and solidarity". Look out for details.

Educate, agitate, organise!

Around the Town & District

■ Garador

Settlement has finally been reached in the dispute between members of the TGWU and AMICUS sections of Unite and Garador Ltd after sixteen weeks of industrial action in an ongoing dispute of over a year. After ACAS and the National officer of the union's Power and Engineering section failed to resolve the dispute, a proposal was submitted to the company by the site reps which would see basic rates of pay increase by 8.7% by January 1st 2009, agreement for the future use of temporary labour, a concession on sickness payment for new starters, with no other change to terms and conditions. The company had little option but to accept and the deal was endorsed by ballot.

The membership had stood their ground, outrightly refusing to submit to the continual threats to tear up all existing agreements in a bid for wholesale change to terms and conditions by imposition and reduced standards of living. Despite desperate attempts by management to continually bypass the negotiation process and mercenary exploitation of migrant labour to break the industrial action, the resolve of the membership never faltered throughout the campaign.

The dispute struck a chord with trade unions from local and national industries. Their support, along with the trade councils, in a show of solidarity for the sixty-strong membership during the nine days of stoppages, was a key element in forcing the company back to the negotiating table. It was a demonstration of what can be achieved through the unity of trade unionism when well organised at the grass root level of the union.

- **Pete Rice**, Works Convenor 2/246 Branch TGWU/Unite Garador.

**You'll never be a union man,
However hard you try
Until you learn to think of "we"
And never only "I".**

- old saying that you won't find in your Christmas cracker. (It applies to women as well).

■ Civil Servants' Struggle Continues

PCS, the union representing Civil Service workers in all government departments is currently involved in a long running dispute with the government. Many people have the misconception that civil servants are 'bowler hatted' pen pushers working in the city. The reality is very different. Many are relatively poorly paid and work hard to provide services to all sections of society, including the most vulnerable. This present government has jumped on the long running Tory band wagon of seeing public sector workers as an easy target to obtain savings in expenditure and make tabloid grabbing headlines. They are playing a numbers game with PCS members' livelihoods by announcing who can make the most job cuts and office closures. Cuts so far have led to many departments struggling to carry out their day to day duties, which in turn leads to totally unfair criticism of the staff. The HMRC office in Yeovil is currently one of many offices facing possible closure.

This year has seen two national one-day strikes, overtime bans and members working to rule. Union membership among civil servants is high compared to much of the private sector. PCS members do not want to go on strike but the level of support for the industrial action taken this year shows just how angry and disillusioned PCS members have become. In a recent consultative ballot, over two thirds voted in favour of the union's strategy of escalating industrial action. This has led to an agreement for formal negotiations to take place, something which up until now had been refused. The PCS demands are not unreasonable; they include improvements in job security and pay, and protection in our terms and conditions. Hopefully an agreement can be reached which is acceptable to PCS members. If this proves not to be the case, members are prepared to once again take industrial action to achieve our modest demands.

- **Mark Hoskins** - PCS Office Secretary, HMRC Yeovil.

All over the country, people are re-discovering trades councils....The trades council movement is absolutely critical now."

--John McDonnell MP, 28 October 2007.

GMB survey exposes “grotesque inequality”

GMB union general secretary Paul Kenny attacked the widening pay divide between fat-cat directors and the poor on after a new survey (published in early December) showed that bosses now earn seven times the national average.

Extensive research by the GMB into the average salaries of 341 professions found that company directors and chief executives earn £214,000 per year, seven times the national average income of £30,000.

This was 20 times more than waiters and waitresses, who are the lowest paid workers in Britain on an average of £11,300 per year, just over a third of the national average.

The average wage differential between the lowest and highest paid has grown from a factor of 19 to 20 over the past year.

Mr Kenny said some executives were actually earning up to 50 times the average wage of the lowest-paid workers.

"We are asked to believe that those at the top need to be 'incentivised' by multimillion-pound pay packages to maintain a dynamic economy, while those at the bottom in the public sector must make sacrifices for the good of the economy," he said

"GMB members do not buy this logic. Those at the top are unnecessarily being paid too much and there is no evidence that there is any benefit from this except to line the pockets of an elite."

Mr Kenny called for progressive taxation to even out the rewards of the economy and for a rise in the minimum wage to £7 per hour to help those at the bottom.

After directors, the next biggest earners were brokers on £101,000 per year and financial managers on £84,000.

Doctors came only fourth on £78,000 per year and secondary school teachers were 78th at £34,000.

Senior civil servants came fifth at £69,000 per year, but ordinary Civil Service administrative workers averaged a mere £16,600 per year, ranking 303rd out of 341.

Advertising and PR managers earned £7,000 more per year than the highest-paid scientists.

Other low earners included school assistants on £11,400 per year, playgroup leaders on £11,500, checkout staff on £12,200 and bar workers on £12,500.

Labour MP John McDonnell said: "This is confirmation of the grotesque inequality in our society, which the government is refusing to tackle.

"The evidence is that many workers are surviving on extremely low pay while the bosses are laughing all the way to the bank."

Treasury stats reveal true scale of private finance scandal

Shocking figures from the Treasury at the end of November confirmed that the private finance initiative (PFI) was a ridiculously expensive way to finance new hospitals, schools and prisons. A few months ago, it was revealed that the NHS is to fork out a staggering £53 billion for new hospitals with a capital value of £8 billion.

But, now, a Treasury letter replying to the Commons public accounts committee has conceded that the total costs of hospital school and prison PFIs will stack up to a staggering £170 billion to be paid to private-sector banks, investors and entrepreneurs by 2032.

Even the most positive spin from the Treasury arguing that the value of payments in future years will be less than the present value admits that the total cost will be £91 billion in today's money. Meanwhile, many PFI hospitals are still struggling to pay exorbitant rents to private landlords.

New Labour candidate is not "New Labour"

On Sunday the 25th of November Paul Smith was selected to stand in the next general election as the Labour Party candidate for the Yeovil constituency. He issued this statement on 5th November, prior to his selection as candidate:

This Labour government has certainly achieved many things, the minimum wage, peace in Northern Ireland, and a ban on fox hunting and so on. However, many within the Labour Party, and those who have left the party in the last 10 years, almost half our membership, are disillusioned with the direction of the leadership. Not to mention the public as a whole, the broad spectrum of people who brought Labour to power in 1997 have, section by section been disappointed by the failure of this government to bring radical change, to reverse the damage of Thatcherism upon society.

Instead of re-nationalising the railways, the very idea is branded by the Labour leadership as "extremism", despite most of the public supporting it.

Instead of restoring rights to trade unions, the draconian Thatcherite anti-union laws, which have led to the biggest assault on living standards in living memory, remain standing, leaving us with some of the worst working conditions, and most over-stressed workforce, in Europe.

Instead of ending private businesses profiteering out of public services, they've allowed the private sector more and more influence, privatising twice as many jobs as the Tories carried out in their 18 years in power.

Instead of tackling corporations avoiding taxes, to the tune of an estimated £97-£150 billion every year, they turn a blind eye. Even using the low estimate that is somewhere in the order of £1600 per person, per year. How far that money would go to funding not only maintaining the public sector but also the expansion of the public sector.

Our democracy is, to be frank, at risk of going stale, trapped like the United States between two right-wing parties who represent business and business alone. Already people are utterly disillusioned with politics, "all political parties are the same, they don't represent us." is something I am sure we all hear too often. But I think they've got a point, we need a Labour Party worthy of the name, that's not what we have at the moment and I hope to push the Labour

Party a little bit more to the left, which I believe is closer to where the British public are on the political spectrum.

"New" Labour simply cannot distinguish itself from the Liberals or the Tories in the Yeovil constituency, and I am convinced the only way to begin to build an effective challenge on the other parties is by differentiating ourselves from the run of the mill policies that get thrown around so much like "we support the NHS", while behind their grinning faces they're planning on privatising jobs, just so private companies can take a slice of our taxes. People can see through that, they're fed up with it, and they've got nowhere to turn apart from the likes of the far-right, who'll say anything and blame anyone and Respect, probably the biggest laughing stock the left has ever known. Too many working people are unrepresented in our democracy, we need to give them a voice and Labour is the mechanism by which to do so. Yeovil needs an MP who will vote in accordance to what the constituents want, not what their party leadership demands especially when it comes to further privatisation of public services and wars fought solely on the grounds of picking up a few lucrative business contracts.

Paul Smith is a member of the Labour Representation Committee, led by John McDonnell MP, which is leading the fight to reclaim the Labour Party for the workers. Website: www.l-r-c.org.uk. He is to address Yeovil TUC on 19th December at Unity Hall, 7.30pm. The other speaker is Dave Chapple, Chair of the National Shop Stewards Network.

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The Labour Representation Committee now has affiliations from six trade unions: ASLEF, CWU, BWAU, FBU, NUM, RMT. It is supported by nine MPs: Jeremy Corbyn, Bob Wareing, Michael Clapham, Katy Clark, David Drew, David Hamilton, Kelvin Hopkins, Lynne Jones and John McDonnell.

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Any comments? We would like to hear your opinion of this newsletter. See our contact details below.

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Yeovil TUC meets every third Wednesday of the month @ the above address. All union members welcome (though only delegates may vote). Meetings start @ 19:30hrs. Is your branch affiliated? Contact us for an application form.