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Triumph of the super-rich

When the minimum wage was introduced in 1999 - at the princely rate of £3.60 an hour - our beloved captains of industry suffered a collective apoplexy, predicting untold numbers of job cuts and disaster for the British economy.

Similar fears were raised when Parliament considered limiting the working week and banning sending children up chimneys.

After the government announced that the minimum wage will increase by 21p an hour to £5.73 from October, Low Pay Commission chairman Paul Myners himself revealed that, "despite many predictions to the contrary, job numbers in the industries most affected by the minimum wage have grown, and grown significantly, over the same period." The rise of 3.1 per cent is well below the current RPI inflation rate of 4.1 per cent and Mr Brown's abolition of the 10 per cent lower income tax rate for the lowest paid will all but wipe out the measly minimum-wage increase.

Meanwhile, as Gordon Brown featherbeds the private equity sharks, he is determined to force an effective pay cut on millions of public sector workers. Coastguards and prison officers have struck and teachers are considering a strike. Local government workers and civil servants are disgusted.

There is an ever-growing gap between rich and poor. The BBC's Business Editor Robert Peston has written *Who runs Britain - how the super-rich are changing our lives* in which he says (p.7), "The really striking phenomenon under New Labour has been the triumph of the super-rich."

The Britain of our dreams ?

FIVE senior GMB union officers have angrily resigned from the Labour Party over the government's "despicable betrayal" of disabled workers.

In a letter to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, GMB national secretary Phil Davies said that he had been a member of the Labour Party for nearly 30 years, but that his party's treatment of Remploy workers was so unjust that he had no option but to resign.

The letter said: "We have been misled by the Secretary of State, who made assurances at the 2007 Labour Party conference which he did not keep....I have been a national trade union officer for 20 years and have never seen workers treated in such a despicable way."

"They had a thought-out plan going back three years which had all been carefully laid out. Promises were made at last year's Labour conference designed to create a smokescreen, which was total dishonesty at the highest level," he charged.

Labour MP John McDonnell said "I will be urging Phil and his brothers and sisters to join the Labour Representation Committee and continue the fight."

The four other co-signatories to the letter were GMB senior convener Les Woodward and senior stewards Steve Sargent, Chris Williams and Phil Brannan.

Remploy was originally set up by Labour to provide work for disabled ex-servicemen. GMB general secretary Paul Kenny said that work meant for disabled workers was being farmed out to able-bodied workplaces in Britain and abroad.

At Labour's Spring Conference Gordon Brown said "Let us build the Britain of our dreams".

"4,200 people in the City of London pocketed £1m or more in bonuses during the financial year 2006-7." - The BBC's Business Editor Robert Peston, *Who runs Britain*, p9. This book is available at Waterstone's bookshop, Middle Street Yeovil.

Around the Town & District

■ Yeovil District Hospital – sterile services ■ Hands off our Post Office

Privatisation of sterile services – a danger to our health by DM Andy.

In the 1990s, the Conservative Government thought that the best way to clean a hospital was by giving the responsibility to the lowest bidder. It saved money in the short term, but at the expense of standards and a rise in hospital acquired infections that we are still trying to eradicate. To their credit, Labour are attempting to sort out that mess, but are on the verge of making a mistake equally dangerous to our health, the privatisation of sterile services departments.

Sterile Services are not a well known NHS service but without their dedication and expertise surgical equipment would not be sterilised correctly and the risk of cross infection between patients would increase. Yeovil District Hospital has a well-regarded department with 14 staff but they are considering a Department of Health plan that will close our sterile services department and a company called Decon Sciences will have a 20-year contract to provide the service from a centre on the other side of Taunton.

This move does not make sense for a number of reasons. Sterilisation needs to be done by properly trained staff that are part of the hospital team, there are dangers of patients waiting on theatre trolleys because the right surgical instruments have not arrived and it's idiotic to transport instruments on a round trip of sixty miles when they can be sterilised right here in Yeovil.

Sean Cusack, Senior Industrial Relations Officer, BMA South West Centre, writes:

While the British Medical Association has not taken a formal position, a number of clinicians have voiced concerns about the outsourcing in terms of whether supplies can be guaranteed, whether quality will be assured and the limited amount of storage of fresh packs at each hospital. The concern is that there is a potential for theatre lists to be disrupted if there are inadequate supplies for whatever reason.

I have also questioned the environmental impact of carting kit back and forth across the counties rather like the supermarkets with fresh produce and asked whether sufficient contingency plans are in place to deal with disruption due to weather, fuel blockades, natural disasters or other severe problems on the roads.

Post Office closures

We should be saying 'Don't kill our shop'. In many villages in Somerset, and further west, the village shop depends on the income brought in via the post office. Most customers are elderly and collect their pension, and spend it, in the shop. It's estimated that 60% in the village of Mudford and the surrounding villages are retired. Many have no transport and are unable to walk any distance.

The bus service is sparse and in some cases (Chilton Cantelo village, for example) only two buses a week. The bus service does not go directly to the alternatives the Post office has given. One of those alternatives is Tesco in Lyde Road - a half mile walk from the nearest bus stop, with no footpath. The roads from Mudford to Yeovil, as in many villages in Somerset, have no footpath.

The Post Office recommends that 90% of the population should be within 2 miles of a Post office. For someone with a car this not a great hardship, but without one it is a nightmare. Most people living in Yeovil have at one time lived in a village and must know that the village shop is at the heart of that village. Along with the pub and the church, all three are slowly disappearing.

So why is this happening? Privatisation. By 2011 postal services will be opened up to full competition as directed by the EU under Postal Directive 2002/39/EC, which amends the initial Postal Directive (97/67/EC) by defining further steps in the process of gradual and controlled market opening and further limiting the service sectors that can be reserved to the universal service provider. The Directive sets 1 January 2009 as a possible date for the full accomplishment of the Internal Market for postal services.

Private companies will pick off the profitable and leave the rest for the government to pick up. Gone are the days of public service. Profit is now God and the poorest in rural areas will bear the burden. We have just witnessed the attack on the postal workers, their pensions and working conditions, and the attempted sacking and suspension of their trade union shop stewards.

Don't let it happen. Sign the petition at your local Post Office.

Write to your M.P. David Laws, House of Commons, London S1A 0AA or e-mail lawsd@parliament.uk
MEPs: Glyn Ford, Labour: glyn.ford@europarl.europa.eu
Graham Watson: graham.watson@europarl.europa.eu

Pittards – victim of Bush’s policy

Here is a résumé of what is happening at local leather manufacturers, Pittards.

For as long as I can remember since returning to the South West in 2003, Pittards has endured one crisis after another. The pension scheme had to be bailed out by the Government scheme so people’s pensions on retirement will be reduced. All this springs from the dollar / pound ratio, as the company is tied in to the artificially low dollar and their accounts have suffered massively.

We have periods of pay freeze and very recently we have an agreement which, for a maximum of 6 months, sees the workforce actually giving up 3% of their salary. We are in the midst of a number of redundancies, mainly from the shop floor, with about 50 in total going, most of whom will have worked their notice. The company is now operating in Ethiopia and more recently in Thailand.

We were not completely happy with the redundancy procedures as regards some aspects of the selection criteria and TGWU/Unite convenor Colin Stewart is unfortunately one of the ones to go.

Livie Reid

The TUC took a stand against the neo-liberal agenda in Europe at last year’s conference *New Labour’s role in the race to the bottom* by calling for a referendum on the latest European Union (EU) treaty.

Paul Kenny, general secretary of the GMB union, accused the government of pandering to business groups such as the CBI in continuing to deny the public a say on the EU, adding, “We’ve never had a serious debate about Europe in this country.”

Tony Woodley, joint general secretary of Unite, told the conference that the current protocol destroyed the Charter of Fundamental Rights – and Britain’s opt-out meant a “disastrous reversal” on workers’ rights.

He said, “In the Thatcher years, we had to rely on Europe to give us some semblance of worker protection. But it is sad to say that with this protocol it will be impossible for British workers to override British law to seek fair play from Europe.

TUC opposes neo-liberal agenda on Europe and calls for referendum

“We don’t want to be part of a Europe that discards the social model that can bring so many benefits to working men and women across Europe.

“Our government is still pushing a Europe with British workers as second class citizens.”

His words were echoed by Mark Serwotka, who said: “We want a workers’ Europe, not a Europe for big business. We should have a referendum.”

Bob Crow, head of the RMT union, said, “If a referendum is good enough for the people of Ireland, it should be good enough for the people of Britain.

“We are told we have a listening government. If that is the case it should allow a democratic vote we were promised.”

Colin Moses, chair of the Prison Officers’ Association, said “We have had a bellyful of broken promises and what we have here is another broken promise. I have been told that to support this must mean I am a closet Tory, but if democracy is to mean anything, surely promises must be met.”

It was by far the liveliest debate at the TUC with all the speakers coming out against the neo-liberal agenda.

The division was not just between those who were for or against a referendum.

The RMT motion, backed by Unison, called for a referendum and to campaign for a No vote, while the GMB resolution simply called for a referendum.

That Tony Woodley and Derek Simpson, the joint general secretaries of Unite, could make mutually contradictory speeches – Simpson for a social Europe and Woodley against a neo-liberal one, while both backed a referendum but not a call for a no vote - says as much about the contradictions in the unions as the fact that the General Council could not agree a position on the motion despite five separate meetings.

The harder RMT motion was defeated, but the GMB motion was passed by over 90 percent of congress.

Agency Workers

Andrew Miller (Lab) has brought forward a private member's bill called The Temporary and Agency Workers (Equal Treatment) Bill and it was passed at its second reading, shamefully without the support of the government.

The aim of the Bill is to give these workers the same rights as directly employed workers.

- As almost half of agency staff would rather have a permanent job,
- a quarter of agency staff are in assignments of more than a year (and not just filling a temporary need),
- yet agency staff in post for more than a year do not gain the enhanced employment rights other workers would enjoy after 12 months in a job as they normally do not have the legal rights of an employee,
- agency workers have no security of tenure and can be made unemployed at any time,
- agency staff are paid 80p for every pound paid to permanent staff doing a similar level of job according to a TUC analysis of official statistics,
- the Government's proposals on agency workers are welcome, but fail to deal with the main problems faced by agency workers and in particular that it is perfectly legal to treat an agency worker worse than a member of the employer's staff doing the same job.

Derek Simpson Gen. Sec of Amicus/UNITE said "There has been a decline in traditional, high-quality, reasonably paid jobs. This has been substituted with casual Labour". " It's estimated that more than one million people are now employed on temporary and agency contracts,

which means they have no job protection, are not entitled to sick pay or paid holidays and are subject to lower rates of pay," he added.

The CBI's John Cridland is bleating "As proposed, the directive would seriously undermine the flexibility that temps offer to firms, hurting the economy and making them far more likely to rely on overtime flexibility from existing workers instead."

The bosses' union said that when Labour brought in the minimum wage. There is no evidence that this measure has harmed businesses or the economy.

Years ago we started the process of creating equality between men and women in the workplace. Now we are just adding to that and saying there should be no difference between how temporary workers and permanent staff are treated.

The Bill has a long way to go as the Government and the Conservative and Liberal Democrat opposition are not supportive.

We need the trade unions to bring pressure on the government and especially trade union sponsored MPs.

According to an article in the Blackmore Vale Magazine March 7 2008, Britain has the by far the highest "temping" market in Europe, employing over 700,000 workers. Just what capitalism wants, an exploitable and expendable work force, part of the process of "the race to the bottom" on wages, working conditions and benefits for workers? A Labour Government should support and promote this Bill and fully sign up to EU directives giving protection for agency and temporary workers including the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

These vulnerable workers need effective Union organisation.

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

Want copies of this newsletter? What's going on in your workplace? Do have any comments? Please contact us:

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