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No to the means test!

"The coming year will demonstrate the inherent instability of the capitalist system, and this will hurt us all." That's what we said in this newsletter twelve months ago.

It is hurting some a lot more than others though. The super-rich financiers are not suffering from fuel poverty, unemployment or the threat of it, home repossession, nor an inability to make ends meet. The government still feathers them at all costs; that is, at our cost.

The worst of it is the government's proposals on "welfare reform" as they call it. Just when the free-market system they support and nurture has manifestly failed to serve the public good and is causing a huge rise in unemployment, they launch an attack on people who have no job. Single parents, the sick and the lame are vilified as "scroungers" but the big bankers who have indeed scrounged billions from the public purse are not, it seems, to be required to do unpaid community work or to suffer a means test. There is no attack, either, on the billions lost due to tax avoidance by big business.

Just as after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, Labour is adopting Tory policies of attacking unemployed people, especially with the hated Means Test. It didn't do Labour any good then and it won't now. We in the trade union movement must support all victims of the government's "welfare reform".

We must also support campaigns for more council housing, higher state pensions, and resistance to factory closures. As global warming threatens us all, and as energy conservation is incompatible with the profit motive, we must demand the public ownership of the energy industries – who now believes we get a better deal under privatised utilities? It's not new Labour we need, but true Labour.

NHS outsourcing - driven by dogma

A damning report, *Driven by Dogma*, by the Office for Public Management, on the cost of commissioning and outsourcing in the NHS, has failed to deliver value for money, patient involvement or improved working conditions.

Evidence in the new report, looking at the experience of those commissioning and delivering services, reveals that promised cost benefits have simply failed to materialise, and quality has suffered.

Public sector union UNISON says the government needs to rethink its approach to NHS reforms in the wake of the report.

It should concentrate on giving NHS patients the care they need - and value for money - rather than using reforms to outsource services and 'throw precious money away to the private sector', the union says.

Can you walk a little faster...?

Postal workers are facing pressure to complete unrealistic delivery routes because of misuse of software system Pegasus, says the Communications Workers' Union CWU.

The union has accused Royal Mail of putting delivery workers under pressure to complete delivery rounds that are too long to complete within normal hours. Bob Gibson, CWU national official, said: "Royal Mail is using this system to meet financial savings without considering the physical realities of delivery rounds. This is putting pressure on delivery workers and leading to bullying and harassment.

"CWU has an agreement with Royal Mail to jointly review all aspects of Pegasus, but the business has reneged on this and is pushing ahead with damaging changes without input from the union. This is having disastrous consequences on services in some parts of the country."

Seasonal greetings to all
our readers.

Solidarity forever!

Around the Town & District

Yeovil Tax Office to Close

Public & Commercial Services (PCS) union members working in the Yeovil Tax office reacted with anger and dismay at the decision announced on 4th December to close their office. Yeovil is just one of 90 offices around the UK earmarked for closure affecting some 3,400 jobs. 17,000 jobs have already been cut from the workforce since 2004. Treasury minister Stephen Timms claims that staff will be offered jobs in alternative offices. PCS Office Secretary Mark Hoskins says that this is simply not true. For the majority of staff working in Yeovil the alternative office is in Bristol.

There is an agreement in place regarding reasonable daily travel which is accepted as an hour. If Timms thinks anyone in Yeovil can get to Bristol in the rush hour in sixty minutes he is seriously deluded. This decision is typical of the unimaginative and uncaring approach of a department driven by a government bending over backwards to bail out big business but seemingly oblivious to the plight of working people. The projected savings for closing 19 offices in the South West is less than £2 million per year for five years. We would dispute these figures, but even if achieved it is a paltry sum compared to the billions being thrown at the financial sector. At a time when revenue to the public purse is vital over £46 billion is being lost through tax evasion and uncollected tax. This situation will only get worse through this short sighted decision.

PCS members everywhere, including Yeovil, have run high profile campaigns in an attempt to reverse the proposals to close HMRC offices. We countered virtually every point put forward by the department making alternative suggestions including better use of and rationalising the existing office space.

Members of the public, councils and businesses all supported the campaign to keep offices local and abandon the obsession with centralising work into urban centres where staff are traditionally more difficult to recruit and retain.

David Laws MP has been instrumental in the Yeovil campaign, raising a number of questions in parliament and meeting with members and representatives both in Yeovil and Westminster. Despite this opposition HMRC appear to have totally disregarded any alternative suggestions and it would seem that the so-called consultation process was a total sham.

PCS members here and elsewhere are angry, and quite rightly so, not just because their livelihoods are under threat but because of the effect on the general public. The department claims that there will be no detrimental effects. This just cannot be the case. At this time the Enquiry Centres can only open the current opening hours with assistance from staff from the back office. If these people are not there this service will undoubtedly be restricted. Once again the more vulnerable members of the public will suffer and be disadvantaged.

The turnover of staff in Yeovil, like many of the offices being threatened with closure, is low. This has resulted in a highly experienced, dedicated and loyal workforce who is now under threat and this local asset could be lost and the service to local taxpayers and businesses will undoubtedly suffer.

We intend to carry on our fight. Some people will argue that we are wasting our time, but as we have said from the outset "if we fight we have a chance, if we do nothing we will definitely lose."

Mark Hoskins - PCS Office Secretary, HMRC Yeovil.

Celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution at The Labour Club, Central Road, Yeovil BA20 1JL (opposite the bus station).

Music, speakers and DVD showing. Friday 30th January 2009. Doors open 7:30pm. Tickets £5 per person - price includes one Cuban cocktail.

Organized by Yeovil & District TUC with speakers from the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. All profits to CSC. For tickets contact Mark 07791 989374 or Joe 07801 817963 or vivianvjw@aol.com

Survey on agency workers

If your workplace makes use of agency workers, and you have union agreements of any kind about agency workers, the Labour Research Department (LRD) would like to hear about it. You can submit information for the survey by following the link below, and by sending copies of relevant agreements by e-mail to lemery@lrd.org.uk

Any information you can provide will contribute to a research report on the issue, and you'll be entitled to receive a free copy of the *Workplace Report* magazine article (to be published early next year).
<http://www.lrd.org.uk/surveys/agency/index.htm>

National Pensioners Convention (NPC)

A conference on "One Hundred years of the Old Age Pension" was held in Bristol on Saturday 22nd November. Yeovil & District TUC provided a coach which took local people to the event free of charge.

The conference was chaired by the National Vice-Chair of the NPC. In his opening remarks he said that, of the 27 EU member states, only Latvia, Cyprus and Spain have worse state pensions than Britain, yet Britain is the fourth richest country in the world.

Kerry McCarthy (Labour MP for Bristol East) said that in 1908 when the OAP was founded (after many years of extra-parliamentary campaigns and struggle) only 25% of people lived long enough to draw it and it was sustained by 14 workers to one pensioner. Today 80% survive to pensionable age and each pensioner is supported by four workers.

Ms McCarthy says that 25% of all pensioners have incomes of £25k or more and that it is better to "target" the poorest pensioners by the Pension Credit Guarantee (PCG) - a means tested benefit. However, 2 million pensioners do not claim PCG they are entitled to. Labour is addressing this by improving winter fuel payments.

Stephen Williams (Lib-Dem MP for Bristol West) suggested something like 36% of all claims for the PCG are incorrect:

41% of all pensioners don't claim the PCG
45% don't claim the council tax rebate
18% don't claim housing benefit.

The council tax is a big issue for many pensioners and Liberal Democrat policy is to replace it with a local income tax. The basic state pension is worth 15% of male median earnings.

Charlotte Leslie (Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Bristol North West) pointed out she is not yet an MP but she believes that older people have garnered great experience over the years and it would be beneficial for them to continue working if they want to; don't write off. We must raise pensions and refocus the National Insurance Fund and make it simpler to claim.

Ms Leslie said that Labour's taxation policy has put 2.5 million into fuel poverty. We must make it illegal to charge unfair payments for meters. We need to impose social tariffs on fuel companies.

Tim Lezard (Chair of the SW Regional TUC) told the meeting that some 'fat cats' are getting pensions 25 times that of an ordinary worker's pension.

Companies are closing pension schemes for workers while preserving those of the already very rich.

Neil Duncan-Jordan, National Officer of the NPC, said that in 1909 you could get your pension at the Post Office and he condemned the PO closure programme. He also condemned the closure of local authority day centres, which in part is a failure of the council tax, which itself is a big issue for pensioners. He said it should be replaced with a local income tax as advocated by the Liberal Democrats. Mr Duncan-Jordan called for higher tax for higher earners. "The politics of ageing" needs further and deeper debate.

Life expectancy varies across the country and 20,000 people a year die of cold related illness. You cannot currently claim carer's allowance and the old age pension yet £18 billion is saved by voluntary carers. Means testing of care flags up the Victorian legacy of "the deserving and undeserving poor". We currently have the biggest means testing programme since World War 2. The bureaucracy around means testing often prevents it from reaching those who need it most. Administration of a means tested benefit costs ten times more to process than a universal one, and it would reach everyone if it were universal.

Mr Duncan-Jordan called for "respect" to be backed up with real policy. He condemned David Blunkett's remarks that working is good for you and that our homes are necessary to pay for our care in old age. Today there is £46 billion in the National Insurance Fund - in four years time there will be £140 billion. He challenged the formula that in 1908 14 workers sustained one pensioner while today it is four workers sustaining one pensioner; that proves we are wealthier than ever and the wider economy can support the state pension. He said that the government is wrong to use the surplus in the National Insurance Fund to fund other things, and people believe they are being conned over national insurance payments.

The Government found £500 billion at short notice to bail out the banks. The National Insurance is a hypothecated scheme, for pensions, health, unemployment and industrial accidents. The pension should allow workers, particularly those who have worked in hard manual jobs like mining, building, road building, etc to have some dignity.

Inflation for pensioners is higher because they have to spend far more of their income. He called for the winter fuel payment to be increased to £500, across the board. We must restore "the link" but the percentage raise should be to the higher of wages and prices, not just wages - it is the link to costs that is important.

Yeovil & District 50+ Forum

On Thursday 13th November 2008, the inaugural meeting was held of the Yeovil and District 50+ Forum at the South Street Centre (formerly known as the Day Centre), South Street, Yeovil.

A talk was given by Somerset County Council Welfare & Benefits Officer, Fiona Johnson and finance officer, Robin Munday.

The Chair of the new organisation is Len (Mac) McCavish 01935 426542 and its Secretary is Dorothy Bennett.

Its objectives are given in part 2 of its constitution:

- 2.1 promote the welfare and interests of older people within the Yeovil and surrounding district.
- 2.2 promote a positive image of older citizens.
- 2.3 help create opportunities for older people, whether through access to advice, services, or through specific project activities and initiatives.
- 2.4 be a democratic, non-sectarian, open and non-profit making organisation that respects equality and human rights, regardless of creed, colour, ability or gender.
- 2.5 be an independent forum, non-party political, and be able to act and liaise with, but not controlled by, any local authority organisation.
- 2.6 provide a platform where matters of concern to and for older persons may be raised and appropriate policies for these concerns can be developed.
- 2.7 promote policies that benefit older people and put forward the views of our membership.
- 2.8 act as an umbrella organisation when making representations to the County, District and Town Councils, or when requested in consultation processes by statutory authorities.
- 2.9 do such lawful things that shall further the attainment of the above objectives.

The next meeting will be held @ 2.30pm Thursday 8th January 2009 at the South Street Centre (formerly the Day Centre), South Street, Yeovil.

Trade unions campaigned for the pension

Some 110 years ago, representatives from 14 trade unions met at the Browning Hall in Southwark, London, to start the campaign for a universal state pension.

Led by figures such as social worker Rev Francis Herbert Stead, Victorian philanthropist Charles Booth, leading trade unionist Margaret Bondfield and businessman Edward Cadbury, they embarked on a decade-long nationwide struggle that, in 1908, secured the first ever state pension. The Old Age Pensions Act was passed in August 1908 and, on January 1 1909, the first state pensions of five shillings a week were paid at the post office to men and women aged 70 or over.

The National Pensioners Convention is organising celebrations of the centenary. Its General Secretary, Joe Harris, says: "We owe the original pension pioneers a great debt of gratitude for securing the very first state pension, but they would be turning in their graves if they knew that, after 100 years, one in four pensioners were still living in poverty.

"In fact, today's state pension is worth even less in relation to average wages than it was in 1908."

He insisted: "Pensioners - both now and in the future - need dignity and security in retirement that only a decent state pension can provide.

"The government" he said, "should use the huge surplus in the National Insurance Fund to raise the state pension to at least £151 a week to give everyone a pension that takes them out of poverty. After 100 years, it's about time we ended pensioner poverty for good."

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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